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## Russian Women and Belly Dancing: Body Work, Fun and Transformation

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RUSSIAN WOMEN AND BELLY DANCING: BODY WORK, FUN AND  
TRANSFORMATION.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty

of

DePaul University

by

Galina Khartulari

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
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Organizational & Multicultural Communication

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DePaul University  
Chicago, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

Russian Women and Belly Dancing: Body work, Fun and Transformation.

By

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DePaul University, 2014

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The study explores how Russian women's socio-cultural experiences can be understood through belly dancing and transformed in belly dance classes. The study findings are based on the analysis of eleven interviews with Russian women of various ages and occupations, engaged in belly dancing for an extended period of time. Drawing on belly dancing as an embodied practice within the Russian context, the findings demonstrate that initial expectations of Russian women regarding belly dancing mutated over time, and new meanings were attached to this bodily practice. The emergent meanings are broadly conceptualized within the following dimensions: (1) remedial effects of belly dancing; (2) the bodily knowledge; and (3) the empowering effect of belly dancing. The study argues that belly dancing has a powerful transformative effect on Russian women

*Keywords: belly dancing; Russian women; the body; embodied practices; transformative experiences; performance and performativity; transnational dance.*

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Since I settled in Chicago's western suburbs in 2010, I have visited my home country, Russia, several times. Planning my trips, I imagined how I would be sitting and talking with my friends in either my, or a friend's, kitchen; a kitchen is a traditional place where intimate talk occurs in Russia. I also anticipated chatter in a small quiet café somewhere in Moscow's downtown, a practice adopted by the Muskovites recently, but widely enjoyed, because of the distances people have to cover to reach their friends and family. Homes are dispersed across the remote districts of the megapolis. I knew well that a couple of my female friends were attending belly dance classes in different dance studios in the city. Planning my rendezvous with them I hardly thought that belly dancing would fit into my tight schedule, and I certainly didn't consider accompanying any of them to a belly dance competition. I really should have, as I was visiting Russia in the summer, and summer is a hot season for amateur belly dancers because of various competitions and performances they are taking part in. It happened during my two visits in summer 2012, and 2013, that I attended belly dancing—three competitions and two performances—and watched my friends, urban professional females, transformed into Eastern *houris*<sup>1</sup>, flamboyant, vivid, powerful, and unknown to me. There was something very special about those competitions. The first thing I spotted was that despite the fact that each dancer was actually striving to win, and the jury were rather strict in defining whether the performance matched the qualifications, there was no real rivalry or hostility between the competitors. Rather, the atmosphere at competitions featured mutual

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<sup>1</sup> The word *hourī* originates from Arabic *ḥūrīy*. As Muslims believe, houris are beautiful maidens,

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acceptance and support. I was also puzzled by the predominantly female audience. The few males present were usually family members who helped the participants to deliver their “stuff”—several costumes and accessories—to the venue.

Another thing I should mention was a blurring boundary between the audience and the dancers. To meet with as many people as possible, I invited a friend, a Russian businesswoman, who also attends belly dance classes, to the third competition hoping that we would have time both to watch the dancers and chat during the breaks. She was very excited about meeting other belly dancing women and joined me readily. Although her studio encourages the students to take part in different events, she had never been at such an event before because of her busy schedule, and so she didn't know any of the participants. However, during the second performance she stood up and started dancing, and was immediately supported by the surrounding audience. Someone passed her over a necklace and a couple of bracelets, the performing dancer came down off the stage and merged into the audience, and soon the whole public, the dancer and a friend of mine were dancing together. Unfortunately, I don't remember how the jury assessed the dancer then. But I remember how this friend of mine was recognized and greeted by other women who were appearing from behind the scenes shouting: “Hey, you're from the same league!” At that moment I realized that they all knew and shared something I had no idea about.

Previously, I had admitted that as leisure activity belly dancing is as good as any other exercise. I had watched my friends, amateur belly dancers, changing physically, losing weight and gaining a different posture. I noticed their growing passion for belly dancing and the belly dancing community, but I didn't take it seriously. It was due to my

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presence at several live performances and immersion into their atmosphere that made me confess that belly dancing deserves a more serious look. I haven't been converted into belly dancing since then, but I have become determined to find out why Russian women engage in belly dance classes and what the dance means to them.

### The Study Goal

Many women I know enrolled in belly dancing classes over a decade ago and continue to belly dance now. Throughout that period the Russian belly dancing community has significantly expanded. There are no exact statistics on the current number of women attending belly dance classes in Russia, but a simple Google search “уроки беллиданса Россия” (“belly dance classes Russia”) produces over 900,000 results. Belly dance studios function all over Russia and attract women of various age categories, from those who are under the age of twenty to those who are over fifty. The proliferation of belly dancing in Russia occurred on the wave of growing interest of the Russians, and Russian women especially, in the body and bodily issues, that, in turn, is a cultural symptom of drastic changes associated with Russian transition to neo-capitalist economy. I was born and raised in Russia and lived there till 2010. Starting from the 1990-s I saw women's growing concerns about their appearance, physical health and agility that became necessary conditions to fit into, and even survive in highly turbulent economic and social environment. Simultaneously, neo-capitalism has brought into existence new industries that provide services for those who want to mold and reconfigure their bodies, or just to engage in physical activities. Plastic and cosmetic surgery, sports clubs and gyms, fitness and yoga classes have become well-established

and rather profitable businesses in contemporary Russia. Belly dance studios have also become markers of the new epoch.

There is a large body of literature on economic and political transformations in Russia; micro-social and cultural shifts, more difficult to identify, quantify, and map, are viewed as secondary compared to the recent macro changes (Pilkington, 2002). My study seeks to address the gap and, specifically, to explore how Russian women's socio-cultural experiences can be understood through belly dancing and transformed in belly dance classes. This first chapter further outlines the Russian social and historic context, and then explains the transnational nature of belly dancing.

Chapter II reviews academic literature that provides theoretical underpinning for this research by drawing on the sociology of the body, various feminist perspectives on the female body and dance scholarship. Together they construct the lenses through which I view women's experiences. The next section of Chapter II gives an overview of the literature that refers to belly dancing as an embodied practice and its meanings, expressed through dance. This second Chapter also introduces the research questions explored in my study.

Chapter III describes the method of cyber ethnography the study utilizes, and in-depth interview techniques. This chapter then describes snowball sampling and its specific use for this project in Russia, and then presents the participants' demographics. Chapter III concludes with the data analysis procedures, the coding and the constant comparison method (CCM).

Chapter IV presents the findings that emerged within qualitative interviews in the following themes: (1) the motives of engagement in belly dancing; (2) remedial effects of belly dancing; (3) the body knowledge; and (4) belly dancing and empowerment.

The final chapter considers the implications and limitations of this research, and also offers the trajectories for further exploration of belly dancing and embodiment.

### Contextualizing Belly Dancing in Russia

To understand why belly dancing appeals to Russian women, what political and social meanings Russian women could invest in the dance, and how these meanings relate to gender embodiment, it is necessary to trace the formation of gender discourses in Russia.

Within the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russian society underwent two drastic upheavals that significantly impacted constructions of Russian masculinity and femininity. After 1917, Russian Marxists driven by the idea of emancipation proclaimed the full liberation of women and guaranteed equal civil, political and economic rights to men and women. Simultaneously, the Soviet state assumed the role of universal social provider and protector. With this, the Soviets had ambitious plans to fully transform the household and make childcare a communal responsibility. The plans were never realized in a full scale, but women enjoyed the full spectrum of political rights and retained complete control over their property and earnings inside and outside marriage stipulated in The Code of Law (1918). Russian women had equal access to education and joined the country's labor force in considerable numbers (Ashwin, 2000; Aristarkhova, 1995; Buckley, 1986; Roschin & Zubarevich, 2005). The Soviet ideological apparatus worked to maintain the

idea of factual and actual equality of genders promoting *the unification of sexes* as a major tenet and denied sex differences (Wood, 1997). The Soviet era shaped Soviet/Russian gender discourse, producing a strong woman and a man whose masculinity was limited as the state took over the traditionally masculine role of the universal patriarch and provider (Ashwin, 2000). The disastrous events of the civil war (1917-1922), famine (1921-1922; 1932-1933), purges of the 1930s and World War II made women's roles in society even more prominent and dramatically changed the country's demographic situation; women became the majority of the population. During and after World War II mothers and sisters had to replace missing men in multiple industries, in education, and at home. Shortages of men and relocation within the network of social life shaped feminine identities of several generations of Russian women. Starting from the initiation of the Soviet state, which regarded the woman as worker/mother, Russian women have been carrying the "double burden" as an active part of the country's workforce and primary caregivers at home (Koval, 1995; Sobolevskaya, March 08, 2007).

Russia's transition from the Soviet system and Communist ideology to the market economy, which started in the mid-1980s, has triggered serious changes affecting both men and women in the country. The changes have reconfigured Russian social relations and led to the recasting of feminine and masculine images and questioning the concept of gender "sameness." The emerging neo-capitalist system has re-affirmed heterosexual family and venerated masculinity of individual men, while the role of the state as collective "fatherly" protector and provider has declined. The new era juxtaposed gender expectations of post-Soviet men and women in regard to male and female roles in the

household. Russian men tend to emphasize women's role in the home and try to assert their positions in the workforce (Meshcherkina, 2000). Recent research shows that Russian women value their position in economic and public spheres, and prefer to remain the household managers and secure their employment. Therefore, some scholars (Ashwin, 2002; Attwood, 1990) argue that contemporary Russian women tend to maintain their Soviet-era gender identity as they continue to assume the double burden, while other scholars assert that women would also like men to participate more in household affairs, but resist the current revival of a patriarchal system (Ashwin, 2002; Kukhterin, 2000; Meshcherkina, 2000). The statistics show that Russia women continue to be in majority and account for 53.2% of the total country's population with the average male/female ratio of 1000/ 1159 (All-Russian Population Census, 2010); they still are the major part of the country's workforce (56% of Russia's working population; the World Bank, 2011). Russian women continue to be the driving force at home (Lipovskaya, 1994).

The recasting of feminine and masculine images has been accompanied by the growing interest of the Russians, especially Russian women, to the body and bodily issues. I was born and raised in Russia, and lived there until 2010, and was able to observe women's increasing concerns about their appearance, physical health, and agility. In the turbulent social environment, regardless of their "double burden" and tight schedules, many Russian women spend a lot of time and money on mushrooming cosmetic and spa salons, plastic surgery clinics, and fitness centers. Numerous offers of belly dance classes are also the markers of the new era. Why do Russian women invest so much in various kinds of bodywork, and belly dancing in particular? My idea is that the

on-going social transition and resurgence of masculinity causes Russian women to employ different strategies that preserve and re-create their shrinking spaces and engage in identity work. In this thesis, I argue that engagement in belly dancing is one of such strategies that provide for sensemaking in the turbulent environment. The creation of such spaces would be impossible without the new possibilities (and extra money) that became available for Russian women. New ways of being, unthinkable before, included women's sport facilities, yoga, and belly dance classes. These facilities are turning into special women's places where women communicate, exchange experiences and engage in the construction of their transitional identities.

#### The Dance that Travels

With the existing absence of academic research on the topic, the history of belly dancing is ardently debated by Western and Russian belly dancing enthusiasts. The true origins of the belly dance are hard to trace; however, those engaged in investigations find its roots in pre-historic human performances and follow its formation through the ancient Egyptian, Mediterranean, North African and Middle Eastern dance practices. What I find really significant is that belly dancing is not indigenous either in Russia, or in the West, where it currently attracts considerable numbers of women. Women, primarily of non-Middle Eastern origin, belly dance in such countries as Austria and Australia, Germany and Great Britain, France and Japan, with the highest enrollment in belly dance classes in the USA (Jarmakani, 2004; Maira, 2008; Moe, 2012). The circumstance positions belly dancing as a transnational phenomenon.

Belly dancing started its global circulation after the first documented public performances at Philadelphia Centennial (1876) and the Chicago World's Fair (1893), where it was called *danse du ventre*, literally translated from French as *belly dance*. The contemporary incarnation of belly dancing was shaped by Hollywood movies, cabaret and club performances. This “hybrid dance style” (Maira, 2008) was adopted in Russia approximately in the 1990s, after the “iron curtain” fell. Today, there are almost identical manifestations of the dance growing in popularity across local cultural contexts. In Western countries and in Russia, belly dancers perform in public venues, classes are advertised in the local media, fitness clubs and gyms offer belly dance sessions for a variety of age groups. A remarkable feature is the proliferation of belly dance online communities, which connect belly dance practitioners and aficionados beyond studio and class settings (Jorgensen, 2012; McDonald, 2012; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). The Internet provides the members of this dance culture with online spaces to discuss the history of belly dancing and its styles; to understand the nuances of costuming; to bring gender topics; and, finally, to further organize and create special belly dance discourse (Moe, 2012; Keft-Kennedy, 2005).

Given that belly dancing is not native for the countries where it is widely practiced at present, its embedding in a new culture reveals the interplay of intermixed discourses, which unfold in the ways the local bodies enact the dance discourse. Considering that various scholars recognize that belly dancing is a gendered, feminine, practice (Maira, 2008; Moe, 2012; Keft-Kennedy, 2005), within this study I am particularly interested in how Russian women's bodily experiences reflect the infusion of new external patterns into Russian cultural practices. According to dance scholars, dance

as an embodied practice blends “materiality and representation” and creates the site for performing and interpreting the complex structures of feelings associated with specific local ways of life and the present moment (Maira, 2008). In this thesis, I argue that in this Russian socio-cultural environment that can be characterized as turbulent, at least throughout the recent two decades to today, belly dancing offers a site where these unspoken feelings can be realized and expressed through dance. In connection with this, I also claim that in a Russian context, belly dance challenges local patterns of embodiment, and interrogates dominant ideologies embedded in Russian cultural norms, and, hence, triggers “the production of counter knowledges concerning the display of women’s bodies” (Keft-Kennedy, 2005).

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

As dance is based on physicality, this chapter opens with conceptualizations of the body that have emerged within poststructuralist thought. The chapter combines the literature coming from such scholarly fields as sociology, feminism and feminist theory, cultural and dance studies. As Hancock et al. (2000) argue, today “the assumption of classical positivist sociology, that bodies belong primarily to biology collapsed, and the meaning of the body has become a problem for linguistic, cultural and social analysis” (pp. 1-2). This change in research agendas has happened primarily due to “re-ordering of the relationship between culture and nature” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973, p. 28) within modernity and post-modernity, when nature, including human bodies, was invaded, conquered, and then improved and polished by human ambition for the sake of civilization and progress. Contemporary scholarship transcends Cartesian mind/body

dualism and acknowledges that we live in “the somatic society” (Turner, 1984). With this in mind, postmodernist theorists clearly articulate the presence of the body in political and social life, as well as recognize its impact on extant ethical and social theories.

### Sociology of Embodiment

Although in scholarly literature the body remains a contested terrain, various existing conceptualizations of corporeality in contemporary literature emerge within or align with either Turner’s (1984; 2008) functionalist or Frank’s (1991, 1997) symbolic interaction frameworks that represent two broad approaches to human embodiment.

Bryan S. Turner (1984) pioneered the interest in the topic of the body in sociology and offered his concept of *somatic society* as an axis of analysis. Turner argues that in a given society all major political and personal problems are both problematized and expressed through the body. As Turner (2008) claims, “the human body is not a given, but a historical reality constantly mediated by human labor and interpreted through human culture” (p. 34). Building on the Foucauldian notion of discipline, Turner formulates his thesis of *the government of the body*. The government of the body includes the tasks of population reproduction; regulation of the body in space; restraint of the ‘interior’ body through disciplines; and representation of the ‘exterior’ body in public. According to Turner, the government of the body can take various forms that depend on what institutional means a society engages to accomplish these tasks. For Turner, the theme of the government of the body should trigger the discussion of the regime in a given society and its mechanisms of social control. The means to control reproduction is patriarchy; regulation is controlled through panopticism (or a society where the power

systems closely monitor life of individuals who are exposed to visibility); restraint – through asceticism; representation – via commodification. Turner claims that the problem of social control is manifest in such cultural markers as disorders. Many disorders associated with women’s bodies such as anorexia and hysteria are signifiers of social disorders, and can be specifically linked to control practices of patriarchy. Turner’s (2008) recent explication of his initial concept affirms the understanding of the body as the locus where politics and physicality intersect. Moreover, he points out that the body is not simply culturally constructed, but constructed in opposition to social authority. Given the role the government and government agencies have been playing and still play in Russia in molding social relations and controlling all spheres of citizens’ lives, Turner’s theory of somatic society seems very applicable to Russian socio-cultural contexts. Ongoing social transition initiated from the top; reawakening of patriarchal norms and persistent arguments of male legislators to confine women to domesticity, the recent government’s attempts to manage Russia’s demographics by stimulating the rise of the birth rate that particularly impact the lives of Russian women, are characteristic of the Russian social environment of the day.

Other scholars who work from perspectives close to Turner’s conceptualize the body that combines somatic and social meanings (e.g. Synott, 2002). Developing Turner’s idea of the body as a socio-cultural construct, Synott (2002) notes that as a social category, the body has “different meanings imposed and developed by every age, and by different sectors of the population” and as such it is “sponge-like in its ability to absorb meanings, but also highly political” (p.1). Also, Synott sees the body as the focal point of individual and group identity, as it is located at the crossroads of personal and

social experiences. Synott's work exemplifies the research thread that bridges Turner's practical and functionalist conceptualization of the body with Frank's perspective of symbolic interaction.

In contrast to Turner's pragmatism and functionality, Frank (1990) offers the typology of the body grounded on the traditions of symbolic interactionism. His typology includes: medicalized bodies, sexual bodies, disciplined bodies, and talking bodies. Frank (1990) creates his categories based on "an odd mix of passive and active capacities of the body" (p. 134). Unlike Turner's bodies "heavily informed by institutional and structural constraints" (Hancock et al., 2000, p. 5). Frank's bodies are agentic and active. Frank (1991) identifies body activities as dominating, disciplining, mirroring and communicating. Through his analysis of illness narratives, Frank (1997) emphasizes the role of communication in materializing elusive empirical accounts of the body and linking them to social practices of embodiment. Moreover, according to Frank (1997), the communicative body "narrative is a privileged practice for sharing our experience of embodiment" because "it calls us to foreground our recognition of our shared human vulnerability as bodies" (p. 105). Mundane conversational interaction, or, how Frank defines it—"putting-it-into-words"—creates the awareness of one's own body and via this "new imagination" teaches us to act differently toward other bodies. Frank's understanding of the human body as active and creative puts heavy emphasis on subjectivity and meanings that do not exist beyond bodily experiences, and, therefore, calls for examinations of those experiences emerging through action and interaction.

My study seeks to reflect on corporeal experiences of the bodies engaged in such creative leisure activity as belly dancing, and is based on narrative accounts of these

experiences obtained via qualitative interviews (as Chapter III will describe). The application of Frank's theoretical frameworks to the belly dancing bodies offers the understanding of women's bodily narratives as informed by multiple discourses of their bodies and emerging in the process of the bodies' interaction in the dance class. The interactive practice of interviewing allows for gaining access to these subjectivities to trace the ways in which these multiple discourses are infused into women's narratives. I want to specifically understand how their bodies are disciplined by the society, medicalized by Russian medical discourse (as some of my participants enrolled in belly dancing for health reasons), to what extent their bodies become sexual through dancing, and how these agentic dancing bodies enact Russian cultural norms and belly dance discourse simultaneously.

The scholars who share Frank's major assumptions and work from the perspective of symbolic interactionism have developed a number of nuanced understandings of embodiment and agency (Crossley, 2006; Lyon, 1997; Latour, 2004; Loenhoff, 1997). In his empirical study, "In the Gym," Nick Crossley (2006) analyzes the practice of gym-going as going far beyond merely physical exercise. As agents, gym-goers assign new meanings to their body workouts and acquire incentives that have an overall impact on their lives. Throughout his analysis, Crossley argues with grand body theories. For instance, Giddens' idea of body projects and Foucault's conjecture of bio-power seek to explain why people invest in their bodies in terms of their market expectations to get better employment or a better relationship. In Crossley's view, these grand theories are too general and, consequently, fail to capture significant differences between the types of

bodywork, and, hence, distinct meanings that attach to an individual body in a specific action.

Lyon (1997) focuses on the role of the body as social agency and asserts the importance of the body in understanding the nature and ordering social life. Referring to Mauss's notion of *habitus*, that can be understood as an antithesis of rationality, and represents a collection of schemata, dispositions and attitudes obtained through socialization, Lyon reinstates the role of society in shaping bodily being and the uses of the body. The body's uses, or bodily techniques, together form a given social context. According to Lyon, social life presumes bodily apparatus and builds on it. In Lyon's view, human emotion is one of the major affective mechanisms through which social *affective order* could be created (p. 97). She writes: "Social relations entail emotion in both its phenomenal and physical aspects in establishment of common interactional rhythms and synchronous behavior in groups" (p. 97).

The above discussion shows that the body establishes itself as individual or group agency on its corporeal capacities, the differences between individuals' bodily capacities, the subjective nature of the bodily experiences and intersubjectivity, emerging from social interaction. Latour (2004) explains that the body is "what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of," therefore, "there is no sense in defining the body directly" (p. 206), because its responsiveness translates into a momentary picture of the world an individual has for a time. Latour's definition captures the relationship between the body and the world. For Latour, the body's inherent sensuality and immediacy of being connects the self and the

world. As the body engages in the accounts about what it's doing, it becomes aware of its interactions with its environment and of the qualities of the environment itself.

Apart from sensuality, the ability to communicate is another way the body creates the world. Synthesizing previously described perspectives, Loenhoff's (1997) framework includes corporeality into communicative multi-systemic events. According to Loenhoff, "expression, appeal and representation clearly refer to the participation of consciousness, corporeality and sociality, to each of which cognitive, physical and socio-communicational dimensions are to be ascribed" (p.69). For Loenhoff, the body plays a crucial role in establishing social communication, and, hence, is "a particular condition, opportunity and resource for the formation of social systems" (p.70). Loenhoff's appreciation of "the faculty of perception" (p. 71) as a communication resource is critical for my research topic. Perception reflects daily experiences based on embodied practices. Perception surfaces in a conversational situation as valences of bodily and linguistic expressions. Loenhoff's study offers a hermeneutic consistency and allows us to see social meanings in communicated corporeal experiences. Loenhoff's conceptualization gives clues to understanding the modality my participants use in communicating their bodily experiences. The communicative modality is grounded on perception and is often connected with what can be defined as the state of mind. The state of mind is shaped by a specific social reality and can be identified via a communicative modality.

This "embodied sociology" (Kosut & Moore, 2010) has brought to the public's attention various kinds of bodies, from socially constructed (Turner, 1984, 2008; Crossley, 2006), to affective (Lyon, 1997), sensual (Latour, 2004), and talking/communicative (Frank, 1990, 1997; Loenhoff, 1997), and others. Among

numerous theoretical frameworks of the body within contemporary scholarship I further focus on the *body as a project* and *body as performance* as relevant for my research topic.

### Body Projects, Body Modifications and Social Performance

The idea of body projects is grounded on Giddens' (1991) assumption that "modernity opens up the project of the self, but under conditions strongly influenced by standardizing effects of commodity capitalism" (p. 198). According to Giddens, the body project is predicated on capitalist commodification of social life and the reflexivity of the self. Commodification corrupts the notion of free individual choice and dictates the imperatives of lifestyle, while the project of the self translates into the desire to get widely advertised commodities, or into "the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life" (Giddens, 1991, p. 198). So human reflexivity is mobilized to make the body function within the referential systems of modernity (Hancock, 2000) that makes the body project heavily commodified (Giddens, 1991). With this, human reflexivity focuses on transformation and reconstruction of the body. To conform to aesthetic expectations of contemporary society people engage in regular exercise, dieting, shopping for 'health foods.' Bodywork has become a marker of a particular lifestyle and individual identity.

Crossley (2006), mentioned in the section above, indicates that in Great Britain the population that belongs to the gym is twice as big as that of regular churchgoers (p. 23). Based on the author's regular attendance at a gym, Crossley's ethnographic account analyzes his own body project and compares his experiences with those of other gym-goers. Crossley's work makes a significant contribution into the understanding of the

specific motifs underlying the gym-goers' body projects that can be extrapolated to those who engage in other kinds of exercise on a regular basis. Crossley recognizes that despite multiplicity of motifs and their combinations, the general desire to lose weight triggered by adherence to the Western modern lifestyle patterns permeates among the gym members. Crossley's other important observation is that as people gain weight involuntarily, they seek to take control over their physical body through exercise. However, as gym-going continues, people acquire what Crossley calls "a gym career", gym-based friendship, learning experience and a transformed sense of self (p. 47). Crossley argues that regular gym-going changes the meanings attached to the body (moral, aesthetic, health-related), and the meaning attached to the gym. Referring to Giddens, Crossley concludes that the nature of bodywork is more related to identity issues than to the body as physical capital. In regards to my study, the engagement in belly dancing can be considered a kind of body project, and Crossley's work provides a very useful framework for understanding and identifying the motives of my participants engaged in this serious exercise (for health, weight loss, aesthetic, and other reasons), and to trace the transformation of these motives after women stick to belly dancing and continue attending belly dance classes for a period of time. These motives go beyond social imperatives dictated by commodification, and my participants find they attach new meanings to their bodies and to other belly dancing activities (competitions, performances) as they go through the process of transformation associated with these changes in their bodies.

The case of body modifications shows that body projects can signify resistance to social authority. These projects are in line with Giddens's ideas that commodification is

not all-triumphant and “even the most oppressed of individuals—perhaps in some ways particularly the most oppressed—react creatively and interpretatively to processes of commodification which impinge on their lives,” and that “individuals actively discriminate among types of available information as well as interpreting it in their own terms” (Giddens, 1991, p. 199). Scholars exploring the cultures of body modification argue that a significant portion of body modifiers can be characterized as out of the mainstream (Pitts, 2003). Many forms of body modifications address the issues that are controversial and manifest new forms of rebellion. Pitts (2003) identifies these issues as gender, sexual politics, inequality and cultural identity. Tracing the evolution of body modifications, Pitts argues that many forms of body alterations were borrowed from non-Western countries, and bring the message of resistance to authority. According to Pitts (2003), today’s body modifiers try to establish symbolic control over their bodies by “experiencing and adorning them in the ways prohibited by Western culture” (p. 9). In my view, Pitts’ arguments strongly resonate with the history and the practice of belly dancing. While belly dancers themselves associate their dance with the embodiment of authentic or archetypal femininity suppressed by patriarchy (Deagon, 2005), and see belly dancing as an emotional and spiritual outlet (Kraus, 2010), the West has long viewed the dance as the embodiment of the mystified and eroticized non-Western woman due to its Middle Eastern origins. Since its introduction to a Western public, belly dance movements based on torso articulation were considered offensive and even immoral first by the Victorian audience (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005); this then triggered the belief that belly dancers are erotic performers. For several decades stereotypes about belly dancing as erotic performance intended to arouse men persisted and that characterization

put the dance out of the mainstream culture and attached a kind of soft stigma (Kraus, 2010) to this artistic leisure pursuit.

The issue of social stigmatization is tied to the notions of performance and performativity. Stigmatization occurs when “we fail to keep our bodies in check” (Kosut & Moore, 2010), while successful social performances follow approved cultural scripts. Based on the metaphor of theatre, Goffman (1959) conceptualized our bodily behaviors as *social performances*, in which appearance, a set of gestures, posture, facial expressions and conversation topics are subject to control and should be performed according to certain cultural scripts. Successful performance avoids inconsistent emotion, and manages the body through monitoring the clothes, bodily noises, and odors. Any inappropriate bodily display that intervenes into the script disrupts social interaction. Given that people categorize each other based on bodily attributes, our body provides social information, which is relevant for our lives. Based on how we were categorized, we may get better chances for life, or become stigmatized and marginalized. This view locates performance within complex patterns of power that shape the matrix of social life, in which mundane practices have a performative nature.

#### The Female Body: Performativity or the Imaginary?

The feminine body is one of the central concerns of feminist theory that stems from the desire to confront Cartesian mind/body dualism correlated with the binary opposition of male/female. As Grosz (1994) claims, “women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal and *more* [emphasis original] natural than men” (p. 14), and are, therefore, regarded as trapped in the flesh that makes their rationality arguable.

Currently entrapment in corporeality has also become viewed as an attribute of colonized and marginalized bodies. To make conjectures about sexual and gender differences, feminist and communication scholars have made significant contributions to theorizing the female body and investigating nuances of female embodiment across various contexts and discourses. Acker (1990) theorizes organizations as gendered processes and focuses on how organizational discourse replicates the social in disciplining and policing the body. Buzzanell (2005) and Buzzanell & Liu (2007) examine the maternal body in the workplace as the site of both control and resistance, while Putnam & Bochantin (2009) address the challenges of the menopausal body within organizational discourse. As most participants of my study are working female professionals, these conceptualizations are very significant for understanding the pressures working women experience in organizational settings. A large number of communication-based studies draw on various representations of the female body in media discourse, including cyberspace (Brophy; 2010), corpography (Miko, 2012), and performance (Thomas, 2005) and show the persistence of cultural stereotypes in the visualization of the woman's embodiment. Exploring gender and sexual differences, scholars draw on biomedical discourse (see Klinge, 1997) that controls and manages medical representation of the woman's body, portraying it as weak and fragile.

This view resonates with Irigaray's (1997) claim that the female body is seen as an imperfect male body lacking power and authority. Discussing how Western culture is biased in regards to the female body, Irigaray introduces the idea of the imaginary body, or the female imaginary. The imaginary body represents cultural projection of imaginary schemes that dominate a society on the formation of subjectivity and perceptions of the

body. For Irigaray, the imaginary body that dominates Western culture is the male body and this results in masculine monosubjectivity. Her claim is that the feminine was historically constructed according to masculine experiences and perceptions of the world, and, thus, colonized by masculine imagination (Irigaray, 1985). As a result, women's being as autonomous subjects was affected. Within her feminist project, to attain feminine unique subjectivity and identity women should rethink their embodiment and situate it in the intersection of the material and the discursive. In Irigaray's view, rethinking social imaginaries is associated with reconsideration of social practices. She suggests mimesis, innovative language, and affirmation of positive values as such practices, which also serve as women's strategies to accomplish gender equality.

Irigaray's ideas of re-imagining the female body find their continuation in the works of Battersby (1999), Davis (1997), and Gilles et al. (2004). While Battersby (1999) explores the imaginary based on the body schemata in scientific discourse, Davis (1997) draws on the multiplicity of embodied practices linking women's embodiment to different cultural contexts. Similarly to Irigaray's idea to rethink the imaginary, Battersby (1999) calls scholars to rethink the feminist self and suggests an integrative approach that could combine imaginative schemata of both old philosophies and new sciences (p. 357), because cultural categorization creates the image of the self. In her view, such an approach would make it possible to represent male and female bodies equally, though differently, as sexual differences create distinct boundaries between male and female experiences.

Davis insists on the primacy of practices in forming subjectivity, and argues that bodies are deeply immersed into everyday reality and instantly engaged in a variety of

mundane routines. These routine practices constitute relationship between existential, or individual lived experiences, and procedural, or culturally habitual ways of doing something. Embodied practices materialize gender difference and reproduce normative femininity; linking the material and the symbolic plays out differently in specific socio-cultural contexts and historical epochs. In application to the Russian context, within the Soviet system the Russian woman was confined to the role of mother, worker, and partner in the enterprise of communist construction, while the man's major task was to manage and realize the construction. The Soviet state assumed "the traditional masculine roles of father and provider, becoming, in effect, a universal patriarch to which men and women were subject" (Ashwin, 2002, p. 1). In the new post-Soviet Russia, the state abandoned its previous responsibilities that triggered changes in the discursive formation of gendered subjectivities. The erosion of the Soviet norms and awakening of social schemata of traditional masculinity made Russian women rethink their role in Russian society and look for the strategies that can help them to reclaim their identities (Ashwin, 2002; Pilkington, 2002). Belly dancing can be regarded as one such strategy.

Butler's (1988, 1993) concept of *performativity* offers a different understanding of gender identity. According to Butler (1988), gender identity is "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (p. 520). Echoing Foucault, Butler accentuates the role of power scripts in shaping performance. Shifting her focus from practices, Butler foregrounds the power of discourses, which are constantly reproduced through forced repeated citation of social norms until they are learned by heart and taken for granted. In Butler's analysis the body is not a material entity; rather, it is a discursively regulated cultural construction, while gender is a performative that

produces “constative sex” (Butler, 1999). Contextualizing performativity, Butler conceives that an individual’s body is a condition and a possibility for creating and reproducing gender as a specific “corporeal style” (p. 521), and connects gender to individual corporeal experiences, time and space patterns. Embodiment materializes and performs social scripts inherent in a concrete historic and cultural context. Questioning the foundational character of gender differences, Butler assumes that heterosexual norms are imposed by social institutions and provoke resistance. Butler sees the examples of such resistance in gender trouble, yet, she claims that agency exists only as “reiterative or rearticulatory power” within immanent discourses (Butler, 1993, p. 15). Discussion of gender and resistance makes Butler conceptualize male and female bodies. According to Butler, disembodied universality is characteristic of masculinity, while the feminine is subjective. She sees a way to women’s liberation in the assertion of subjectivity and transgression of imposed gender norms. Also, resistance, for Butler (1990), exists outside dominant culture, in its borderlands, where alternative discourses that challenge and threaten dominant culture are produced through marginal practices.

Butler’s idea that social/institutional rituals mold gender performance and shape subjectivity is critical for understanding the Russian context, where the state traditionally intrudes into the process of identity formation via massive propaganda and cultivation of specific gender images. In contemporary Russia, the ambience of transition offers the agency the multiplicity of discursive means and existing “corporeal styles,” in Butler’s words, are likely to reflect controversy and ambivalence. Sadly, the major trajectory tends to reinstate patriarchy. With regard to my topic, Butler’s idea that parodic repetition of gender identity has the potential to disrupt normative performance, presents belly

dancing in a different light. Viewed and promulgated as ‘harem fantasy,’ or as representation of the oppressed and subjugated Eastern woman, belly dancing may seem to reaffirm patriarchal expectations. What belly dancing offers is a possibility of contesting the reified status of gender performance (Butler, 1988, p. 520). As Keft-Kennedy (2005) argues, in its current form the belly dance is an attempt to embody the exotic Other and, therefore, can be seen as projection of grotesque on the feminine body. It creates a transgressive potential for women, destabilizing the assumptions of appropriate women’s embodiment, especially of costuming and behavior.

Butler’s performativity and Irigaray’s feminine imaginary represent two distinct viewpoints on sexual differences and gender within feminist scholarship. While for Irigaray sex differences are foundational, Butler views sex as a social category that is not static and comes into existence through the encumbrance of normativity, or the prescriptive power of social discourses. Both concepts draw on mimetic practices, but while Butler sees mimetic practices as constantly reproducing dominant power discourse, and, thus, reaffirming normativity, Irigaray emphasizes mimesis as a feminine strategy to visualize the feminine imaginary, and, correspondingly, view it in a constructive way. While for Butler the repetition of practices rectifies gender representation within dominant discourse, and, therefore, is regulatory, Irigaray asserts that repetition can be a re-articulatory practice that reaffirms gender difference. Both concepts offer clues for developing complex perspectives on dancing bodies. This is the focus of my study.

Dancing Bodies

Dance scholars and practitioners generally agree that dance is a realm of human movement based on corporeality. Reed (1998) argues that the broad category of human movement means that dance studies is an interdisciplinary field (p. 504). Although dance studies evolved along a different path from feminist and cultural studies, within sociology and anthropology, cross-fertilization among scholarly fields has brought to dance scholarship “methods from many sources, including its own” and shaped its agenda with the focus on “understanding of the place of human beings within historical conjunctures by working in the area of tension between representations of the body and, in the broader sense, the lived body performance” (Morris, 2009, p. 95). Dance scholarship has provided fruitful insights into the interrelation of expression and identity construction, aesthetic and ritual practices, culture and bodily movements, the form and functions of dances, embodied learning, and mimetic practices (Bosse, 2008; Green, 1999; Jackson, 2001; Risner, 2002). As Reed (1998) asserts, the most significant dance works raised the issues of the politics of dance, which “draw from semiotics, phenomenology, postcolonial, poststructural, and feminist theories” (p. 505).

Thus, Hamera (2005) in her multilayered essay on a ballet studio applies Butler’s concept of performativity to examine complex processes underlying the lives of young ballet dancers. A ballet studio is described as an environment of ambivalence, a home and a panoptic place, a place of discipline and surveillance, and pleasure, marked by competition and solidarity. Showing the formation of relational structures, Hamera demonstrates how ballet training shapes “vernacular landscapes” that are always local, and are stabilized by idiosyncratic ideas of seeing the world (p. 93). Yet these landscapes are “shot by through with contested notions of appropriate gender performances and

gendered resistances, class-inflected expectations of the relationship between art and life, and the issues of discipline and authority” (p. 94). Hamera argues that cultural meanings of place are infused into dance through multiple iterations of bodily doings, so that ballet techniques become the means of “discursive conventions,” which “offers to dancers all the comforts and discomforts of home” (p. 100).

The metaphor of *home* Hamera employs resonates with the metaphor of culture, the culture we each belong to. The training process resembles the pitfalls of socialization with all the discomforts it offers to bodies. The solidarity and friendship in the ballet studio are based on shared knowledge of these discomforts that become a kind of a family secret. A ballet studio, thus, is a microcosm where gender, class, sexuality, and even age issues intersect, replicating the universe of “a big culture”.

Ballet discourse can be regarded as antithetical to belly dancing. If ballet is elitist, and is a ‘royal’ dance that emerged in European courts, the belly dance is rather ‘democratic’ with its folk roots. Ballet is patterned, belly dancing is not. Ballet requires a special body, with almost ideal proportions, a small head, a long neck, and a short torso; contemporary belly dancing welcomes all kinds of feminine bodies.

Osumare (2002) engages the concept of performativity in his discussion of breakdancing within global pop culture and asserts the interdependence of performance and performativity in transnational dance discourse. Osumare (2002) defines dance performance as “a series of bodily enactments that bring a conscious intent and purpose to the physical execution of rhythmically patterned movements” (p. 31), and links performance to representation of implicit socio-cultural values. In opposition to other definitions, performativity, according to Osumare, is an unconscious but “meaningful

series of bodily postures, gestures and movements that implicitly signify and make sense of social identity or identities in everyday pedestrian activity” (p. 31). In Osumare’s interpretation, performativity is seen as a kind of body “methodology” that connects the subjective sense of the self and the world, whereas performance is a “technique” that embodies alteration and transformation of historically developed movement styles and underlying cultural values representative of specific collectivities.

The proliferation of breakdancing onto the transnational arena caused tensions between performance and performativity, and produced what Osumare calls “the intercultural body.” The intercultural body poses the question of intertextuality within embodied contexts, or the interplay between intermixed multicultural and national discourses, as well as addressing the issue of cultural appropriation. Osumare’s conclusion is that the intercultural breakdancing body has the potential to disrupt the dominant discourse, because the breakdancing body often moves in subversive ways. A parallel argument applies to belly dancing. Its hip drops and belly rolls are subversive in regards to the norms of feminine embodiment dictated by patriarchy.

Irigaray’s idea of re-articulating femininity through embodied practices forms the ground of Summers-Bremner’s (2000) work on European concert dance. Regarding the dancer’s body as “her instrument,” Summers-Bremner uses the concept of *sensible transcendent* to show how women can realize their bodies through dance. For Summers-Bremner, dance offers both the experiential and imaginative, and its kinetic energy leads to transformation of meanings (p. 93). The kinetic aspect of “sensible transcendent” challenges the notion of women’s passive materiality characteristic of Western ideologies, and facilitates the discursive exchange and mediation of new feminine

selfhood. As does Hamera, Summers-Bremner draws on ballet training, and argues that “for female ballet dancers the experience of dancing ‘well’ involves taking the path and undergoing the process which results in an absence of ‘self,’ but also an absence of body, in the sense of the body as flesh with all its foibles, and as agent of individual dancer’s being” (p. 96). So through the hard work of constant repetitions classical ballet creates conditions that denounce feminine subjectivity, and engages a dancer in “self-forgetfulness” (p. 96). Making generalizations about Western dancing culture, Summers-Bremner claims that traditional Western dancing often “serves as a metaphor for getting in touch with misplaced yearning, for shedding inhibitions, and for all that is felt to be excluded from the world of words” (p. 97). In terms of psychoanalysis, the unspoken is the “nostalgic subjectivity” residing in the body and is associated with desire and pleasure. “The dialectic of movement,” Summer-Bremner explains, can remind us of our inconsistency and loss, “but, paradoxically, connote a sense of limitless possibility” (p. 98) and offers unlimited freedom. Summer-Bremner’s analysis catches the perceptions of belly dancers, who recall even the ecstasy the dance brings to them. Often, belly dancers associate themselves with an archetypal, primordial femininity achieved through dance (Deagon, 2005) and which can be considered as their breakup with the existing social order.

A separate strand of dance scholarship focuses on the issues of the body and knowledge (Green 1999, 2007; Parviainen, 2002). These scholarly works clarify the concept of bodily knowledge —“knowing in and through the body” (Parviainen, 2002). Drawing in discussion within dance literature about kinesthetic intelligence, Parviainen argues that dancing is not just about knowing skills, because there is always an aesthetic

intent behind it. Success of dance often depends on the extent to which the intent has been realized. The realization of the intent requires reflexivity and is a powerful resource of self-knowledge. Parviainen's important insight is that knowledge acquired through dancing is related to other kinds of subjective and objective knowledge, and, thus, is a gateway to understanding the self and the world while opening the perspective of transformation. Her other insight refers to the idea of kinesthetic empathy. Explaining kinesthetic empathy with the example of aging or injured dancers who transmit dance knowledge as trainers to other dancing generations, Parviainen (2002) explains that their comprehension of movement represents corporeal schemata based on teachers' perceptions and feelings of motion. In dance training, these schemata are translated into verbal instructions (pp. 20-21). In my view, the idea of kinesthetic empathy offers another explanation for emergent relational structures in dance studios. Kinesthetic empathy is based on shared tacit knowledge received from imitation and learning as doing. Given the engagement with group performances, the dancers' intent to accomplish performance at the highest level of expression has the capacity to facilitate the formation of collectivities.

### Belly Dance Scholarship

Within dance scholarship belly dancing as a distinct research topic has received little attention. Scholars almost unanimously attribute this lack of attention to two circumstances: (1) the Western public have repudiated belly dancers and regarded them with suspicion throughout history; and (2) that belly dance discourse has formed upon the ideologies of orientalism and representations of colonized bodies (Jarmakani, 2004; Keft-

Kennedy, 2005a,b; Kraus, 2010; Maira, 2008; Miraftab, 2004; Moe, 2012; Potuoğlu-Cook, 2006; Reed, 1998; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003; etc.).

Sellers-Young (2002), one of the scholars who pioneered the interest towards belly dancing in her work “Raks El Sharki: Transculturation of a Folk Dance,” envisaged the growth of belly dance popularity based on two factors: (1) the romanticized image of the Near East; and (2) the increased acceptance of the female body (p. 142). Shay & Sellers-Young (2003) note that belly dancing has attracted millions of people investing millions of dollars and enormous time to get necessary skills. They also remark that belly dancing has become iconic representation of the Middle East in the West. In their discussion of hybrid belly dance discourse, Shay & Sellers-Young describe it as multi-functional. The placement of breath, pelvic orientation and coordination of body parts integrate the mind and the body, and connect a woman to her erotic (p. 18). However, in its vocabulary belly dancing contains cultural codes of femininity in strictly heterosexual terms. Shay & Sellers-Young view belly dancing through the prism of orientalism and exoticism. Referring to Said (1979), who identifies the ideology of orientalism as conclusions about the bodies and borders conquered and mapped, which serve to justify necessity and endurance of colonialism (Said, 1979), Shay & Sellers-Young (2003) argue that orientalism “is any distortion, exoticizing, or romanticizing of the Orient by Western choreographers and dancers” (p. 19). Shay & Sellers-Young have been the first, so far, to indicate that there are several kinds of orientalism including, for example, national orientalism. They provide an example of Russian artists and Diaghilev’s production of orientalist ballets, which introduced the Russian version of the Orient, based on the colonized Muslim populations of Central Asia and the Caucasus (p. 20).

Jarmakani (2004) sees belly dance as the embodiment of socio-cultural tensions, and the lasting popularity toward belly dancing articulates “something meaningful and powerful about U.S. notions of female sexuality” (p. 124). Specifically, belly dancing communicates to the American audience the materiality of the body “in the ways other dance forms might not” (Jarmakani, 2004). According to Jarmakani, it happens because the belly dancing body is a “grotesque” body. Drawing on Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque, Jarmakani asserts that the belly dancing body “straddles the boundary between profane and sacred sexuality” (p. 125) and exists in the borders between understanding feminine sexuality as both sacred and profane. The profane is grounded on the tangible materiality of the female body and associated with lovemaking and childbirth, while the sacred alludes to the creative power of the divine feminine. As evidence of her conjuncture, Jarmakani indicates the transformation of some belly dance movements into striptease.

Kraus (2010), however, stresses that belly dancers invent a lot of strategies to demarcate themselves from strippers. The invention of these strategies is associated with soft stigma, or negative public perceptions about belly dancers as erotic dancers, or “bad girls” violating the norms of appropriate conduct for women. According to Kraus, this is a cost of serious leisure participation belly dancers are paying. Kraus’s empirical study shows how belly dancers monitor their behaviors while wearing costumes, how they engage in bodywork to have a distinct posture (different from strippers), and how they use the technique of “defensive othering” (p. 448). Defensive othering suggests that stereotyping may be true for some other dancers, but not for them.

Moe's (2012) work continues the discussion of belly dancing as a leisure activity with the focus on its benefits beyond exercise. According to Moe, the belly dance provides for many women an outlet through which to challenge the norms of hegemonic masculinity (p. 226). She also identifies the effect belly dancing has as empowering and cumulative; further engagement in belly dancing fosters creativity, creates understanding of bodily movements, and leads to self-acceptance. Using the framework of gendered leisure activity, Moe argues that "the feminist nature of the dance is the arena ripe for further theorizing and investigation" (p. 227).

In this study I explore the politics of dance, or dance as what Reed (1998) calls the "expression and practice of relations of power and protest, resistance and complicity" and how "identity is signaled, formed and negotiated" (p. 505) in application to belly dancing women's practice in this Russian socio-cultural context. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: What motivated Russian women to enroll in belly dance classes and continue this practice?*

*RQ2: What transformative experiences, if any, do Russian women have as a result of their engagement in belly dancing?*

Chapter III outlines the research methodology I utilize to answer my research questions.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methods I apply in the exploration and analysis of how Russian women experience their bodies in the context of Russian social and cultural

practices and what role belly dancing plays in negotiating normative constraints imposed on Russian women by the Russian society. The study utilizes the data of eleven qualitative interviews with Russian women who engaged in belly dancing on a regular basis. Chapter III opens with the detailed description of the recruitment process, and then I outline the participants' demographics. Next, the Chapter draws on the methods I engage within the study. This chapter is followed by the data analysis.

#### Recruiting and Sampling: Russian Specifics

The primary data for the study were obtained through eleven qualitative interviews with Russian women who regularly attend belly dancing classes. Participants for the interview were recruited via the snowball sampling technique. The snowball sampling implies that initial research participants assist a researcher in finding other subjects and refer her to other potential contacts (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Some scholars see referrals as a main disadvantage of the snowball sampling technique (e.g. Baltar & Brunet, January 27, 2012; Castillo, 2009; Sedgwick, December 20, 2013). Their claim is that snowball recruitment includes little control over the sampling method, and a certain kind of sampling bias, which emerges when the subjects refer the researcher to others they know well (Castillo, 2009). Other scholars, on the contrary, argue that snowball sampling as an efficient tool of qualitative research, specifically under the circumstances when a researcher's credibility is crucial for establishing a rapport with the participants. As Baltar & Brunet (January 27, 2012) note, referrals work especially well "in those studies that respondents are few in number or a high degree of trust is required to initiate the contact (hard to reach/hard to involve population)" (para. 8). Though the

observation refers to traditionally vulnerable populations that avoid being put in the spotlight of public attention, it well applies to Russian cultural norms and historic conditions.

Traditionally, Russians have been suspicious of strangers and outsiders, and trust typically characterized the internal relations within the boundaries of a specific social circle. To enter a concrete circle and to get accepted, a seeker should have approved credentials. Currently, as the society is highly atomized, the circles of trust have become narrower and are primarily confined to family and close friends (Russian Attitudes and Aspirations, 2007). As a result, getting appropriate credentials is likely to have become more difficult. In addition, to initiate a contact from outside a group in Russia has always been a mediated process. Russians rely on relational aspects and are used to scanning a broad social network to finally detect “the right person.” “The right person” should have some informal relations with the desired contact (a single person or a group of people). Besides, she/he is expected to be able to introduce an entrant in a positive way. The purpose of the scanning is, therefore, two-fold: it establishes the credibility and trustworthiness of the entrant, while providing her with the information about the contact’s personality and the contact’s environment. Simultaneously, this mediated process also ensures the feeling of safety in both the entrant and the contacts, and lays the ground for emerging trust between them.

My gateway to the belly dancing community was through my close personal relationships with four Russian women who enrolled in belly dancing classes some years ago, when I was living in Moscow. These women still devote much of their spare time to belly dancing. During my summer visits to Russia, in 2012 and 2013, their fascination

and excitement about belly dancing sparked my interest in the belly dancing community. My contacts supported my intention to conduct the study and gave their preliminary agreement to serve as its core participants. I applied for and received IRB approval, (DePaul IRB # GK020714COM).

Based on these relationships other participants of the study were recruited through word-of-mouth. When my contacts referred me to others within the belly dancing community, personal references served as my credentials and helped to establish cooperation with the participants from the start. Another traditional Russian value is cooperation with other people and mutual support. My core participants emphasized that I needed help and assistance with my research and that strongly appealed to my Russian audience.

To help my core participants with the recruitment process and to clearly state the purpose of the study I devised the Suggested Verbal Recruitment Script (see Appendix) both in English and in Russian. In addition to my current status as a Communication graduate student at DePaul and the purpose of the study, the Recruitment Script also contained my personal email address that a potential subject could use to contact me directly if she was willing to take part in the study. The potential interviewees first contacted me using my personal email expressing their agreement to serve as interview participants. In response, each participant received an informed consent/information sheet form in English and in Russian. In the same email I asked each participant to let me know when she could be available for the interview and provided my personal Skype name for her convenience. Some participants immediately added me to their Skype contacts lists

and used Skype instant messaging to let me know when they might be available for the interview. As a result, I was checking both my Gmail and Skype accounts to schedule interviews and resolve emerging overlaps and switches.

### Cyber-ethnography and Research Sites

The feminist ethnography that “places a researcher and her informants in a collaborative reciprocal quest for understanding” (Stacey, 1988, p. 23) suits the purposes of my study the best. Within the study I use a method of cyber-ethnography that combines traditional ethnography with digital technologies. As a method, cyber-ethnography is located within an interpretive research paradigm, and is “gaining momentum in use and credibility in reputation” (Keeley-Browne, 2011, p. 331). Several existing cyber-ethnographic studies primarily focus on online communities and examine online forums, blogs, and online media production (Hallett & Barber, 2013). Cyber-ethnography challenges the traditional understanding of fieldwork associated with “traditional notions of travel, distance and discovery” (Kunstman, 2004, p. 2) and such well-established methods of data collection as observation and face-to-face interviewing. Furthermore, the practice shifts research sites to online spaces and alters the established assumptions of what a research site is.

This study utilizes the conception of multisitedness offered by Hallett & Barber (2013) as applicable to online research methods. Multisitedness implies that in online interaction physical and online spaces overlap and shape a continuum for social interactions. In the case of face-to-face online interviewing digital technologies help to establish connections between different locations and create a kind of physical co-

presence of virtually dispersed people. The technology allows ethnographers to reach multiple sites without leaving their homes. As Eichhorn (2001) argues, the distinction between “home” and “field” erodes as researchers find access to participants online. Although both traditional and feminist ethnographers recognize that online interactions have become part of our social reality, they may still be reluctant to include digital technologies in their research design. One of the common critiques of multisited research claims that this kind of ethnography doesn’t allow for establishing relationships with people that could help a researcher to deeply immerse in their social worlds and experiences (e.g. Berg, 2008). Another critique is that multisited research is dislocated and ignores the geographical context of the study. In my view, digital technologies, and Skype video calls specifically, are able to create conditions and modality very similar to a face-to-face conversation. As communicators can see each other and each other’s physical environment, this kind of communication mirrors any traditional talk at home or in a public place like a café, for example.

Given that the use of digital technologies facilitates the creation of interactive non-hierarchical spaces (Keeley-Browne, 2011), I am convinced that a researcher is in a position to engage in feminist in-depth interviewing. The fact that online interactions have become part of lived realities (Hallett & Barber, 2013) simply meant that our conversations became integrated into the daily routines of my participants. As many others, my participants spend a lot of time on social media, tweet to each other and arrange events via Vkontakte (InContact), a Russian analogue of Facebook. To a significant extent, then, they are used to discussing their issues online. I didn’t plan my study as an investigation of my participants’ online experiences and their online

representation. Rather, I want to stress here that digital technologies enabled me to connect to them across time and space, and capture the social and cultural experiences they shared with me during intense online communication. For me, personally, this online exchange was very much like returning home as my participants and I come from the same culture and have a lot of common experiences of the Russian socio-cultural context.

### Interviewing

I conducted eleven interviews during the period of March 03 to March 30, 2014. The purpose of interviewing is gaining access to the women's thoughts, memories and impressions of belly dancing. As Lindlof & Taylor (2010) note "interviews are particularly well-suited to understand the social actor's experience and perspective" (p. 172). In interviewing I adopt a feminist epistemological position and assume that "women can be knowers, and women's concerns can be the locus of analysis, and social reality is already mediated by patriarchal and capitalist ways of seeing the world" (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 18). To ensure that interviewing is guided by the research goals, the interview is designed as semi-structured and consists of open-ended questions. The open-ended questions allow for generating detailed responses in a narrative form (see Appendix for my interview questions). All interviews started with an informed consent statement and asked permission for recording.

All eleven interviews were conducted in face-to-face format via Skype, the Internet application that provides full confidentiality for video calls and contacts. Before I started the process of interviewing I thought one of my tasks might be to ensure that all interviewees have the necessary software. However, the belly dance community turned

out to be highly ‘computerized,’ and women commonly use Skype to communicate with their counterparts in other Russian cities. As I mentioned, many of them started contacting me with Skype messages instead email.

The interviews ranged from 40 to 100 minutes. The average interview lasted 58 minutes. The interviews primarily took place in late evening for the participants and in the morning for me due to a 10-hour time difference between Chicago and Russian cities. My study participants primarily selected Friday nights and weekends as better days for free and relaxed conversation.

Each interview was recorded via Call Recorder for Skype for Mac OS, which I installed on my personal computer. The Call Recorder saves audio and video calls automatically on your computer. The recorder also has *record* and *stop* buttons I could use to stop the conversation if my participant showed signs of wanting to withdraw or to leave out some part of her narrative “off the record.” During the sessions the native language of the interviewees, Russian, was used. Russian is my mother tongue, and I am also fluent in English.

Online interviewing provides a number of advantages. Video calls are very similar to face-to-face conversations. They are synchronous and make non-verbal cues available for the communicators. Also, online interviews provide more flexibility for the participants, they do not require special venues and people are usually in the settings they are used to and feel comfortable in. While interviewed, my belly dancers were located in the privacy of their homes, and I was in my home in a Chicago suburb. Many a private talk in Russia takes place in the kitchen, when close friends gather at the table. During most interviews women were seating at their kitchen tables, their zones of trust, whereas I

was sitting on my favorite coach. It is also suggested that in cyberspace “there is a tendency to be more open with others” and that in virtual interactions “people express themselves with little inhibition and dialogues flourish and develop quickly” (Exploring online research methods in a virtual training environment, 2006). During our conversations women who hadn’t met me before in person were managing their households, talking to me, introducing their family, showing off their pets. As Hesser-Biber (2006) notes, “after all, the researcher is an insider and should be familiar with the respondents’ group situation” (p. 140). They readily shared their photos of belly dance competitions and in belly dance costumes. Using the advantages of technologies, they instantly provided me with a bunch of links to YouTube videos and online materials documenting their careers in belly dancing. I dare say that my participants felt comfortable and relaxed during our interviews.

Skype call recorder automatically saves calls on a researcher’s computer. Recorded calls are listed in the recording application and show a person’s Skype name and the date and time of the call. All my recorded calls are in the format of video files, which can be launched at any time for transcribing. Taking into account that my interviewees would disclose to me their identities, I started interviews with a promise to keep their identities confidential, and I gave each participant an option either to select a pseudonym or to leave it to my discretion. Some participants chose their own pseudonyms, while others left the choice to me. The transcribed files bear pseudonyms. Overall, although there is hardly a possibility that interviewing people about their leisure activity, in our case, belly dancing, could put my participants at risk; nevertheless, all

precautions to keep their identities and personal information confidential have been taken.

The eleven women who participated in the study represent a demographically diverse group. Seven participants attend belly dance studios of Moscow, one participant attends classes within the greater Moscow metropolitan area, one participant comes from St. Petersburg, one comes from Kazan, and one comes from the Ural area. Women attending belly dance classes have different professional occupations: four are accountants, one is member of an industrial research and development group, one an embassy employee, one a legal professional, one self-employed, one a graduate student, one businesswoman, one technical specialist, one member of an international company training department. The age of the study participants vary from 25 to 50+ years. Two of my participants are in their 20s; three are in their 30s; three are in their 40s; and three are in their 50s. Participants have different marital status, including married and single women, as well as those “in a relationship.” All of them have a college degree.

### Data Analysis

I started the analysis of the data by watching recorded video files. The purpose was to get back to my interviews to familiarize myself with the bulk data and identify major themes while transcribing them. Using the constant comparative method, I returned to each video file at least three times to ensure the accuracy of transcription. Constant comparison is the approach used in grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). As Thorne (2000) highlights “this strategy involves taking one piece of data (one interview, one statement, one theme) and comparing it with all others that may be similar

or different in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between various pieces of data” (p. 69). Going through the data at the initial stage I used open coding to separate themes emerging from the interviews. To preserve the voices of my participants I primarily used in vivo coding. “In vivo coding is the practice of assigning a label to the section of data, such as an interview transcript, using a word or a short phrase taken from that section of the data” (King, 2009). The purpose of in vivo coding was to ensure that my participants’ voices are heard. After in vivo coding saturation, I returned to the data to come to more abstract conceptual codes.

This method is in line with my research focus on women’s bodily experiences. The interviews, guided by a feminist perspective, generated a lot of personal narratives, which informed my understanding of these experiences. Human experiences and the social nature of experiences are particularly emphasized in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Plummer & Young, 2010). Many feminist scholars share major tenets of grounded theory and place particular emphasis on deriving meaning via interpretation of language and symbols (Plummer & Young, 2010), as language reflects ideologies and existing hierarchies. I paid special attention to my participants’ communicative strategies, such as metaphors, gestures and silences they used in rendering their experiences. Understanding these strategies provides a key to understanding my participants’ social realities. The conceptual codes that emerged from data analysis reflect several domains of my participants’ experiences related to their social realities.

Finally, the selected sampling technique helped me to deal with the belly dancing community in another way. When I was planning my research I didn’t anticipate that I would have to negotiate the dilemmas associated with my immigrant status and the fact

that I represent a Western educational institution. Rather, I felt that I was returning “home,” to the place I had been born and belonged to. Yet, at a certain point I had to admit that my research was becoming cross-cultural as I was bringing back home my new luggage of Western conceptual frameworks and was going to utilize methods common in Western scholarship. The current public sentiment in Russia is characterized by skepticism towards Western methodologies, which “didn’t work in Russia.” Alongside this sentiment, the traditional socialism/capitalism divide, rooted in the times of the “cold war” and the competition between the Soviet Russia and the USA, supports the assumption that the U.S. is flourishing, and those who have immigrated, as myself, “are doing much better,” and, therefore, are a sort of privileged class. Moreover, my interviewing process coincided with the crisis around Russia’s annexation of Crimea that put Russia in opposition to the international community. The crisis was accompanied by increasing anti-Western propaganda in Russia, and the rise of nationalistic feelings among the Russians, who got keen on opposing anything coming from the West. The explanation coming from my referrals that I am a graduate student doing research “about us [belly dancers]” significantly mitigated general influence of the political environment. Also, my status as a student toned down the potential perception of status differences, because most of my respondents are accomplished professional women. In sum, in attempting cross-cultural research, gaining access to the members of a certain social group is critical. It should resonate with people’s cultural expectations that further helps “to avoid silences and opposition during the fieldwork” (Parameswaran, 2001, p. 96).

## CHAPTER IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

All Russian women that I interviewed attend belly dance classes on a regular basis and occasionally perform at competitions and festivals as solo dancers or with their studios' ensembles. The time of their engagement ranges from over a year to more than twelve years. These time periods were sufficient to commitment to belly dancing and integrating it into the women's weekly routines. I start this chapter with the first theme: motives for enrolling in belly dance classes. Next, I trace how women's initial expectations mutated and what new meanings my participants attached to belly dancing by analyzing their accounts of the gains they experience due to their extended engagement in this bodily practice. The chapter continues with the theme of drawing on acquisition of bodily knowledge through the dance work. Lastly, the chapter discusses empowering effects of belly dancing on women within the Russian context as the fourth and final theme.

### Motives

Belly dancing is a serious leisure activity that entails "intense and dedicated involvement over a period of time, often with an eye toward establishing a particular skill set" (Moe, 2012, p. 202). The study participants reported devoting up to 6 hours per week attending group and individual training sessions (extra face-to-face hours they often take while preparing their solo performances for competitions). All my participants are working professionals, and most of them have family commitments. I strongly believe that to build attendance of belly dance classes into their busy schedules required a lot of thought and extra planning. In addition, participation in belly dancing incurs necessary

expenses: group and individual sessions, competitions, and costumes cost money. The issues of time and expenses have been considered and decisions made upon enrollment. Within this study I focus on my participants' "vocabularies" of motives (Crossley, 2006), or explanations and justifications for enrollment in belly dancing despite the obstacles that might be associated with the practice. I claim that these explanations, or the "motive talk" (Crossley, 2006), emerge within a specific social context and count as "good reasons" within the Russian cultural environment. Moreover, as Crossley (2006) notes, the discussion of motives "is not merely a matter of retrospectively accounting for past action but equally of prospectively controlling future action" and, therefore, "is occasioned in ongoing contexts of situated action, often in circumstances where habitual patterns of action have been broken down or been called into question" (p. 28).

To encourage my participants to talk about their motives, I asked each of them to take me back to her personal history and tell me how it happened that she enrolled in belly dance classes. Given the diversity of my participants in terms of their age and occupation, the *mélange* of their motives didn't come as a surprise.

Most of my study participants, the women over the age of thirty, explained that they had been looking for ways to increase their mobility because of their confining jobs where their bodies stay static and get stiff due to continuous sitting. For eight of my eleven participants enrollment in belly dance classes was a transfer from other forms of physical activities they had tried, such as fitness, aerobics and the like. As Dana, a pleasingly plump woman of about fifty who has danced for eight years, commented:

I have always tried to engage in some exercise to remain nimble and maneuverable. I exercised at home, and I engaged in fitness. As for belly dancing,

I had a sore spine, and all of a sudden I bumped into my girlfriends [подружки/podrujki] in the street... hadn't seen them for a while... uhm [smiles]... who told me about belly dancing and a belly dance studio next to my house. It was something I hadn't tried yet... My girlfriends and I enrolled in the class together. My girlfriends left soon, but I stayed... (Interview, March 17, 2014).

In the similar way, other participants also reported having switched to belly dancing after practicing fitness or gym-going. Ljudmila, a Russian business woman in her forties, both sturdy and passionate, described her fitness club experience in the following way:

All this is very boring! Monotonous, and people have such faces as if they were at work, again! Like Sisyphus and his boulders... I needed something more outgoing and joyful. I saw belly dancing during my trip to one of the Eastern countries, and I said to myself – this is it, go for it! I'm still going to a swimming pool, though... (Interview, March 11, 2014).

Like Dana, some participants over thirty mentioned health issues that caused them to hunt through the ways of improving their physical condition and to revise their previous lifestyles. Roxana, a woman in her fifties, with long hair and a royal posture, who has been dancing over twelve years so far, recalled having a medical problem that brought her to the idea of breaking her routines:

I spent almost a year in bed. My sister drove me to my office, and I could hardly walk a hundred meters without shortness of breath. I had this neck problem, something with venous drainage that caused that constant dizziness. I don't like

## Running Head: Russian Women and Belly Dancing

these popular sports, you know...I am against taking pills and all that “medical stuff,” and it made me think what I could do, because I couldn’t afford staying in bed for another year. Once my niece, a Cultural Studies major, mentioned the healing effects of dancing. It wasn’t at that moment that I made my decision, but somehow the idea was planted, and soon I saw an offering of belly dance classes almost next door. It was very important then that I wouldn’t be going far from my house. It turned out to be a Khaleej style class, but I was very glad as it focuses on neck rotations...umm...a bit risky for me as I understand now, taking into account my previous condition, yet, it helped. (Interview, March 3, 2014)

Olivia, a big tall woman of around forty, explained her motives in a similar way:

...in a critical situation I can be very tough. Like after you return from a consultation with a doctor, you don’t know what to do, you pour a glass of vodka and you can’t afford to feel like a complete wreck, just to look for another physician who would tell you that it’s not that terrible...Well, I should meet some restrictions on my physical activities, no jumping, jerking, like that, because of my spine condition. Belly dancing is the kind of thing that my physician allows me to do... Also, I found a class very close to my office... (Interview, March 11, 2014).

Although it may seem that these accounts of my participants (of the age of thirty and above) demonstrate women simply seek to maintain their wellbeing through physical exercise while they are aging, a deeper look at their narratives shows that their motives are more nuanced. Almost all participants stress that the proximity of a belly dance studio was a critical factor to make a decision to enroll. The circumstance uncovers the

women's initial attempt to reconcile those family duties (primarily because they devote all their time after work to various household issues) they don't question and perceive as mandatory with some kind of personal autonomy they receive from physical activities, and dance, specifically. Dana mentioned that she started belly dancing when her "kids grew up, and the time came to get something for myself" (Interview, March 17, 2014). Having health problems, Roxana and Olivia distrusted Russian official medical discourse and were looking for healing alternatives. Also, Olivia, who is well aware of her body size, said that visiting other sports facilities she had to acknowledge that her body is a bad fit for such things as fitness and yoga, or other kinds of dancing, through various direct and indirect hints coming from both instructors and attendees. Ljudmila and Dana said that belly dancing was an activity that they had never tried before and both recalled being immediately attracted to it so that each decided to enroll. This intention to try something out of the ordinary and novel seems to oppose the vicious circle of their daily routines.

"The younger generation" of my participants offered another set of motives. As Helga, a young Russian woman in her twenties, who has been dancing for seven years, recalled:

I was never doing anything 'girlish' [девчононье/devchjonochnje]...no knitting, sewing, embroidery, that kind of things...I was doing alpinism [mountain climbing]...such a tomboy, you know...I was walking with my Mom one day and I suddenly saw an ad at the entrance of the house where we were living, and I asked Mom "Why don't I try dancing?"... Oh! I suddenly remembered one more thing! There was a girl in my school, very popular, and she was dancing Latino ... you know it's SO gorgeous! Beautiful! Yes, I was a bit jealous. She was travelling

all the time, participating in competitions... Now when I look back I see that I have got all that...I'm travelling, I'm meeting people, I dance... And in my first belly dance studio, my instructor, she was an Arabian, she had a stomach with such oblique muscles [shows soft ovals], and I asked her how she was exercising, and she told me that she wasn't doing anything special, just dancing... Now I have obliques like hers, and I know you can achieve this only through many years of dancing" (Interview March 8, 2014).

Helga's story looks like a typical teenager's concern about popularity among her peers. Meanwhile, she linked her acceptance by a broader social environment to her becoming "girlish" through dance as a distinct feminine practice that socialized her into the adult world as a woman. She was initiated into the feminine by her mom who supported her desire "to try something girlish" and took her to a belly dance studio. In her narrative Helga also mentioned what activities count as feminine (sewing, embroidery, and ...dance!), and justified her choice of belly dancing by her desire to attain the "real" feminine body as she imagines it.

Another dancer, Jade, in her twenties too, who is wearing the clothes of the size called "petite" in Western countries, told a different story about her dream to attain a perfect feminine body:

I was watching "The Clone"<sup>2</sup> series you must remember, it was very popular then...and I saw those beautiful women dancing, very beautiful! And I thought I'd like to be like them. I even had a sketchpad where I was describing all their movements and, also, what I wanted to get, such things like long hair, long dark hair, make up, all that kind of things... I now see that their dance was a kind of

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<sup>2</sup> A Brazilian soap opera launched on Russian TV in 2004.

primitive, with many mistakes, but then it was something! (Interview March 8, 2014)

As Helga, Jade was strongly influenced by a dancing feminine image. Yet her story associated with it isn't the one about the desire to get accepted by her peers, and then a broader social circle. The media images caused her to set the goal to become like this movie star. In Helga's case, Helga got her mother's approval and support. Jade's father, however, opposed her aspiration to engage in belly dancing and labeled belly dancing as "naughtiness" or "monkey business." Jade, therefore, began by learning to dance at home using the videotapes she bought with her pocket money. She officially enrolled in her first class when she got her first job and her first salary, so that she could manage her expenses independently. Jade also mentioned that her mother supported her aspiration, and in many ways tried to pursue Jade's father to accept it on the grounds that belly dancing brings so much satisfaction and happiness to their daughter.

My two other participants, Adelina and Lana, connected their engagement in belly dancing with their long-lasting interest in Eastern cultures. Adelina, a slim stylish woman in her mid-forties, who has been dancing over eight years, attributed her desire to start belly dancing to her childhood memories and her cultural origins:

I come from a family of ethnic Tatars. My Grandma was a Muslim and could read and write in Arabic. Since my childhood I have loved the sounds of this language and Arab music. In my soul, as you might understand, I have always wanted to engage in Eastern dance, but in the [19]80s it was hardly possible, it came later. So, I drifted to a fitness club, and then the club opened a belly dance class. One day I was at my fitness session, and suddenly another trainer came as a substitute,

the trainer who was teaching belly dancing in that club... I should thank my lucky stars for that, as I had long wanted to engage in Eastern dance... As soon as it happened, I switched, and here I am. I have changed several studios since then to find more classical, authentic dance instruction (Interview, March 17, 2014).

So, for Adelina engagement in belly dancing was triggered by her desire to awake the dimensions of her self that had remained dormant and to represent her ethnic heritage via this embodied practice.

Lana, a woman in her mid-fifties has danced over a year, but her interest in belly dancing emerged at university where she was engaged in oriental studies. She speaks Arabic (and translates the lyrics of Arab songs for her class) and has many friends from mid-Eastern countries. She noticed that the idea of trying Eastern dance had always been at the back of her mind, but it didn't come to anything until recently. She also disclosed that recently she had passed through a divorce. Although she didn't say it directly, her enrollment in belly dancing seems to stem from her reflective self-evaluation and desire to establish her agency in defining a new trajectory of her life, as well as to reclaim her challenged femininity through belly dancing.

Overall, although my participants claim that belly dancing emerged in their lives all at once, their narratives give evidence of the opposite. In most cases making the decision about the enrollment in belly dancing engaged a great deal of reflexivity and rethinking of their self-concepts, whether the need to enroll was associated with a switch to a healthier lifestyle (as Roxana and Olivia indicated), the desire to attain a different body image (Helga's and Jade's case), or the intrinsic hunger of cross-cultural mindsets (Adelina and Lana). The narratives also expose my participants' impulse to break with

mundane daily practices (Ljudmila, Iris and others) and find the opportunities to engage in an activity beyond the habitual.

### Remedial Effects of Belly Dancing

While the previous section provides the variety of contexts within which each agentic woman made the decision to engage in belly dancing, this section draws on my participants' gains that they attribute to their participation in belly dancing.

One of the major themes emerging from my participants' narratives refers to belly dancing as a remedy. Previous academic writings pointed to the relationship between dance (and belly dance as well) and healing, although this literature is scarce and focused rather on dance as preventive treatment or recovery from injury and illness via dance (Hanna, 1995; Moe, 2012; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Dance, however, amalgamates complex psychophysiological processes and "involves body, emotion *and*, mind, all three of these culturally mediated" (Hanna, 1995, p. 324, italics in the original). The subjective experience of dance, therefore, integrates somatic (bodily apparatus), affective (feelings, moods) and cognitive (evaluation, attention, perception, imaginary) dimensions as they are construed by a specific culture. Interestingly, some scholars, for example, Hanna (1995), argue that cultures also shape specific experiences of pain, and emphasize that social factors create the patterns of stressors that lead to various disorders and cause pain conditions that affect people's wellbeing. This paradigm alludes to Turner's concept of somatic society discussed earlier. As an anthropologist, Hanna (1995) reminds us that, through history, dance has been a means of coping with illnesses and stress. Within this study I am interested in how my participants' subjective experiences of healing and its

transformational effects are situated within Russian cultural context. Also, given the multisensory nature of dance, I claim that the remedial effects of belly dance stretch beyond improving physical conditions. Therefore, I focus on the changes my participants report have been occurring in various spheres of their lives since their engagement in belly dancing.

I stimulated the discussion of the topic by asking the question “Thinking about your previous answers can you describe some details of what you have gained from belly dancing? Is it what you expected from the start or how do these gains differ from your expectations?” The question was formulated to help my participants reflect on their previous and current experiences, so that I could trace the trajectory of their transformation overtime.

As it follows from the discussion of motives, some of my participants chose belly dancing for the healing qualities they had heard of earlier. Roxana, who has recently won the first prize in the belly dance competition in the category of grand seniors, recalls:

It took me a year and a half to restore my spine affected by spinal stenosis and to fight the symptoms of starting menopause ... When I joined the class I was stumbling over my own feet, mixed up the directions of the movements... It was very difficult... And today I see tremendous progress, my spine is working, and the whole body feels lighter... I recently worked in the garden, at my dacha<sup>3</sup>, for 6 hours. And you know what? My spine didn't hurt. Maybe, for the first time in many years! (Interview, March 3, 2014).

Roxana lives in an extended family and plays the role of the family mediator. Her previous health condition developed in the context of drastic economic shifts in the

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<sup>3</sup> “dacha”(дача) is a summer cottage

country, the so-called second redistribution of property in the 1990s. It was the time when the older generation of her family had to retire, and she and her sister had to take all responsibilities for the household survival, including raising three children of young age.

Olivia, who also chose belly dancing purposefully as a kind of healing physical activity, appears to be playing the role of the family “senior member” and provider as well. Her workload and domestic responsibilities take almost all her time. Olivia is a highly qualified professional, well versed in technologies, but she regretted not having arranged her “personal life”<sup>4</sup> and she recognized that her life before belly dancing was generally lacking something. She specifically remarks:

Many people know well only one way, “work-home.” It’s an issue in big cities where people have to cover long distances. A one-way trip to work normally takes a couple of hours...So, it’s a vicious circle with the stops “home-public transport-work,” and it makes you crazy. You start feeling that you don’t exist. At that point I said to myself, “That’s it, I need to change the trajectory”... Also, my doctor advised me to try belly dancing...In addition, I was going through this notorious “middle age crisis,” you know, when you come to realize that you have approached your forties, and you haven’t got your own family... and will likely not have children...And it’s the dance that balances you and keeps you adequate by switching you to a different task and offering a different rhythm...(Interview, March, 11, 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> For Russians the expression “to arrange personal life” (устроить личную жизнь/ustroit’ lichnuju zhizn’) commonly means to have a family of one’s own, or to be in an intimate relationship. Applied to a woman it means that she is married, or lives with a permanent male partner.

In the same vein with Olivia, Iris, a thirty-three-year-old woman with fancy blond hair and rich feminine contours, who has been dancing over nine years, also remembered facing challenges in her personal life. She added that she had always been “a big girl, and it’s always different.” At the time she enrolled in belly dancing she was having a tough time in her life and got depressed as her long-lasting relationship had ended. Due to belly dancing, she managed to recover surprisingly fast, because she felt an overwhelming surge to dance, and it was like falling in love.” Unlike Olivia who was often perceived as “a bad fit,” Iris was always receiving compliments for the way she could dance at parties and the like. Yet, different kinds of dance she tried didn’t bring her that special kind of kinesthetic satisfaction she now receives from belly dancing. As she puts it, “the movement itself, how my body is reacting to it, what emotion I experience, and the level of comfort I feel are totally different from other dances, like flamenco, for example, that I tried” (Interview, March 6, 2017). In Iris’s case belly dancing worked as a remedy helping her cope with psychological and emotional states, rather than the health issues clearly articulated by Roxana, Dana and Olivia. However, in my participants’ narratives health and emotional states are often intertwined. Thus, Roxana, Dana, and Olivia noticed that liberation from pain, which comes from mastering the movements that provide pain relief, has a tremendous effect on viewing other aspects of life. As Roxana noticed, “You have got wings, and can take upon yourself much more.”

Emotional and psychological dimensions of belly dancing embrace a wide range of other effects that my participants reported. For instance, Ljudmila, who works in a predominantly male environment at the top of a big corporation, highly values a switchover the dance ensures. In addition to belly dancing, Ljudmila goes to a swimming

pool. She said that she adores when “water embraces you and all your skin feels it, your whole body...and washes everything away.” It seems that belly dancing and a swimming pool help her confront her disembodiment at work, where she is simply “a big boss,” by informing her mind about the presence of her body through touch and movement. In belly dancing she appreciates an opportunity to change her business attire for something “more feminine” and to talk to other women about the matters unrelated to business:

G.: And what do usually discuss with other women in your studio?

L.: It’s a kind of “dance talk”...Hairstyles for long hair, we all have long hair... Fabrics for our costumes and designers...which of them have introduced new collections...How belly dancing helps cope with women’s period pain...

G.: Does it?

L.: Oh, yes, it does! (Interview, March 11, 2014).

As corporate discourse significantly constraints her possibilities to expose her natural femininity, belly dancing integrated into her schedule reminds her of the dimensions of her identity, which are normally dormant or consciously suppressed while she is in her corporate office. At dance sessions she has a chance to discard her top managerial image and reconnect to her femininity by assuming a role of a regular woman.

In a belly dance studio the role switching occurs when a woman comes to a studio from work and starts her workout. Another switch occurs during the preparations for solo and group performances when participants should think through the images they are going to embody individually or as a group. The possibility to try on multiple roles through the practice of belly dancing facilitates the change of women’s attitudes toward their bodies and their acceptance.

For example, when Olivia enrolled in belly dancing, she soon saw that she was surrounded by a variety of body shapes and sizes, and that her studio instructor easily accommodated Olivia's body via assigning her distinct roles in group and individual performances. Gradually Olivia's initial self-concept of "a bad fit" lost its significance. In addition, her studio members were at different levels of expertise, and she became aware of no need "to be perfect." "I try to do what I can," Olivia says. She mentioned that her muscles are still sometimes sore, and she often carries a tube with pain relief ointment. But this occasional pain doesn't seem to bother her much now. For Olivia, this muscle pain rather demonstrates that she is getting more control over her body through exercise and is more associated with living. She also discovered that "you don't need to have a pair" (a male dance partner) to get all joys and pleasures of the dance. She talked about belly dancing with a happy smile showing her satisfaction with her discoveries.

Lana, who had gone through a divorce that challenged her femininity, remembered getting her initial aesthetic pleasure by watching other dancers' performances at competitions in which her studio participated. Fascinated by the intricacy of their movements and the splendor of the costumes, she, at the same time, kept thinking that she would never dare perform on stage:

I was looking at them [the dancers] thinking how could I, an old hellcat, appear among these beauties? You know, there are many movements with accents on arms, and my arms are saggy...What if somebody sees this? (Interview, March 25, 2014).

Now Lana takes parts in competitions and performs her solo dances on stage. She said that when she got to know the belly dancing community closer, she realized its gendered

nature, because in her class and at competitions all dancers are female, and the audience is predominantly female, too. So she stopped hesitating. As she asserted, “Belly dancing is what we [women] are doing for ourselves, and I think of [a belly dance competition] as a game. I just follow its rules.”

Iris, who turned to belly dancing to help her cure her emotional trauma, noticed tremendous progression in accepting herself as “charming, beautiful woman who celebrates herself and translates that to her audience whether the audience are her parents, or her beloved man.” For her, “belly dancing is love.” She added:

Something mystical was happening...like insights...You start viewing everything through dance, you communicate with people differently, you smile more often, as a consequence your mental schemas are changing, and the whole pyramid of your life changes its structure...(Interview, March 6, 2014).

The changes Iris was noticing caused her to reconsider the relations with her overprotective mother. Although the changes Iris was experiencing were rather positive and related to affirmation of her feminine identity, Iris’s mother resisted Iris’s growing self-confidence, up to expressing constant concerns that Iris was entrapped by a sect or a cult. However, as Iris recalled, happiness and joy of dancing won the battle, she refused to take any money from her mother, and began to live separately and completely on her own.

Some aspect of Iris’s story that describes the path of getting independence and maturity due to belly dancing resonate with Helga’s story. When Helga came to her dance studio, she was the youngest of all other dancers, “middle-aged women,” as she

called them. Through regular visits and talk she was being initiated into womanhood that she considered a positive change:

When I came I didn't understand anything like where the locker was, how to start the workout...I was the youngest and the smallest, those ladies took me around and explained everything...they treated me as an equal, and I took part in all their conversations and sat at the parties. I began to understand many things. I definitely became a more responsible and mature person due to that (Interview, March 8, 2014).

Also, Helga feels more satisfied with her present body image. She says: "I once thought of gaining some weight, but now I am pretty happy with how I look."

Marjory, a very attractive woman in her thirties, with an hourglass body, very womanly, said that for her, rapid progression to accepting her body started with her participation in competitions, where the audience was receiving her performances with applause; to her surprise, in fact, as she was shy to perform because she thought of herself as "massive." She explained, "Imagine that the public loves you. It's your special day, a gala day...and you are special...there are very few days to remember in our lives (Interview, March 7, 2014). The way the public received her first performances refuted Marjory's idea that other people may perceive her body negatively. She loves performing, and, therefore, teases "the public" in the streets. By that she means that she occasionally "plays a belly dancer" and uses the belly dance moves, when she is in the mood for doing so, in public places. The fact that she attracts public attention energizes her and cheers her up.

For my participants, acceptance of their bodies occurred together with their growing sense of accomplishment through “the work” of belly dance, as Deagon (2005) and Parviainen (2002) put it. Almost all my participants talked about the progress they were making in mastering the dance “technique,” which was hard to comprehend at the start. The sense of accomplishment opens up a prospective, or my participants’ “dance careers,” leading to self-actualization. Dana described it in the following way:

After you did everything technically correct in your solo performance at a competition, it’s another occasion to praise yourself and raise your self-esteem... the people around [outside of belly dance] hardly praise you often...In belly dancing you can also demonstrate a variety of your abilities...you are moving along this path with happiness and joy, and the sunset is very far away (Interview, March 17, 2014).

When I talked to Lana, who long hesitated to take part in “home” competitions (final performance of her studio at the end of the season), she was looking forward to a chance to demonstrate her new performance that she saw as a big step forward, and was very excited about performing at “the League.”<sup>5</sup>

These dance careers interrogate common social expectations and assumptions about what is an appropriate activity for a woman of a certain age. My younger participants, Helga and Jade, mentioned that they tried to rope their mothers into belly dancing. However, neither said yes. Each mother explained that “it’s too late” and that “she is too old for that,” although they are even younger than some of my older participants. Curiously, Jade heard the same argument “It’s too late for you to start dancing” from her

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<sup>5</sup> The Russian Belly Dance League

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peers when she was enrolling in belly dancing. To that she responded in the following way:

J.: There are people who are always telling you that it's too late to start this and that... always late [shrugs her shoulders]...But when I see the girls dancing I understand how much else I need to master...I hope I will be dancing for [pauses] many-many years.

G.: I've heard they now have the category of Grand seniors.

J.: Yes! [smiles] And then there will be Grand-Grand, and Grand-Grand-Grand...

As I mentioned earlier, Jade's father disapproved of her attempts to enroll in belly dancing. Jade slightly regretted that he never showed up to see her performing, and said she would like him to see "who she has become" and how much she had achieved in dancing. Iris, who has a collection of prizes from the competitions in her city, noted that, although she now speaks with her mother, her mother avoids mentioning anything connected to belly dance, thus, ignoring the place and the role of the dance in her daughter's life.

Whereas Jade's and Iris's cases show inconsistency of belly dancing with their parents' expectations regarding what is a useful leisure activity or a hobby, Marjory's case shows how belly dancing can potentially disrupt a professional trajectory mapped by parents. Marjory went to university to continue "the family tradition," and was going to follow in her father's footsteps by becoming a legal professional. After graduating from university, she tried to pursue a legal career in her native city, while combining it with her dance career. Yet her dance career was developing in the way that she had to think

through what she really wanted to do. She discovered that she had a growing desire to lead a dance class and to teach, and switched to dance teaching. She explained:

As a legal professional you should be focused and concentrated. There is no place for emotion. I still meet with my former coworkers. They are SO boring...dry...I am not cut out for that...I want to show women how they can expose emotion through their bodies, because we have never been taught how to express different emotions (Interview, March 7, 2014).

Marjory's words show that she generally loves the belly dancing lifestyle, which differs radically from what legal occupations could have offered her. Echoing Helga, she compared belly dancing to "adventure" that involves distant travels to other cities, meeting new people, the opulent costume, the thrill and joy of performance.

The findings discussed in this section show that the practice of belly dancing involves more than acquisition of a particular set of skills or knowledge about how to do a specific movement. Most of my participants underwent transformations of their psychophysiological and emotional states due to their engagement in belly dancing. The findings point out the relationship between specific corporeal styles and professional occupations, and also allude to the specifics of the cultural context. Corporeal styles are part of our bodily knowledge. The following section considers the relationship between belly dancing and bodily knowledge.

### Bodily Knowledge

The transformational effect of belly dancing discussed earlier can be referred to what Parviainen (2002) calls "dance work" and "thinking through" movement. By

thinking through movement a dancer both animates schemas, or pre-reflective experiences, of movement, and explores the world through motion. Parviainen defines this process as a path (very close to Dana's definition of belly dancing). On this path a dancer usually acquires knowledge about her body and its capability of moving spontaneously and independently. Dance performance also deal with a dancer's imaginary, through which a dancer's body is capable of producing new sensations and experiences the dancer wasn't aware of or familiar with before. Through practice, or doing dance, a dancer acquires new knowledge, which in most part is absorbed as tacit into a dancer's subjectivity and creates a kind of dancer's bodily vocabulary. According to Parviainen (2002), "studying a certain movement style, the body habituates to this vocabulary, eventually living through it" (p. 21).

Within this study I am interested in what kind of new bodily vocabulary my participants have acquired through belly dancing, and how this belly dancing vocabulary interacts with their implicit vocabulary shaped by Russian contexts. I am also interested in other kinds of knowledge about the body my participants have gained due to this bodily practice.

Several study participants directly reported that they had difficulty in comprehending the dance technique, because the belly dance movements are not "conventional," or "trivial." Roxana, a very proficient belly dancer in her fifties, pointed out more specifically:

Still, I am not very good at improvisation, because the movements of that kind don't exist in our culture. Neither our mothers nor grandmothers could move that way. [In the beginning] I was looking at the moving bodies and I didn't

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understand how they were doing that, it was miraculous. They come from another world, and are a product of a different civilization (Interview, March 3, 2014).

Roxana's comment characterizes belly dancing as a cross-cultural practice and outlines the issues arising from enactment of conventions of a corporeal style that belongs to another culture.

Helga, a twenty-year old laureate of many competitions, noted that for her the hardest part of the exercise was and still is to get her body relaxed:

For me, the most difficult thing was a hip shimmy move, because you need to relax your upper body. I still cannot fully unbend my body...Arabesque needs plasticity, you should be like a cat...I still feel I am a kind of mechanical, straight legs, straight arms...You need to dance your dance, not to construct it technically correct (Interview, March 8, 2014).

Helga's words allude to the specifics of Russian bodies, whose freedom of movement has traditionally been constrained within the Russian political context.

Lotos, a beautiful woman in her forties, who has been dancing for over ten years, said that specific knee movements and isolated movements of separate body parts were problematic for her. She explained that in belly dancing "the body flow" is critical, but hard to attain. Her metaphor communicates the feminine nature of belly dancing and suggests the genuine feminine body as leaky.

The "right" dance technique is a constantly debated topic within the belly dancing community. To embrace its nuances belly dance aficionados turn to variety of sources related to belly dance history, explore existing styles and biographies of famous belly dancers, arrange workshops and competitions at home and go abroad. All my participants

exposed knowledge of belly dance history (though to a different extent) and awareness of specific features of distinct dance style. From my participants I have got an understanding that prevalent dancing styles in the West and Russia differ. Whereas *raqs sharqi*, an individual solo improvisation, enjoys overwhelming popularity in the Western countries, and the USA specifically, Russian women prefer *raqs baladi*, a group dance, fused with other styles, such as Moroccan and Persian. It is likely that the preference of *raqs baladi* over *raqs sharqi* among Russian dancers is due to the more collectivistic nature of celebration in Russian culture, while solo improvisation celebrates individualism inherent in Western culture.

The discussion of the “right technique” is often intertwined with the discussion of benefits the right movement gives to women’s health. Women widely discuss how abdominal movements provide for the proper functioning of the female body, how they relieve periodical pain and menopausal symptoms. Of course, women discuss which exercises help attain the desired shape of breast, a thinner waist, how to become more sexually attractive, and the like. Talk of this kind has been uncommon in Russia, especially between different generations of women. Discussing the issues of sexuality arising from their dance work, Russian women bypass implicit social taboos.

An essential component of women’s talk around the body in a studio is body care. Lana explained that her instructor strongly encourage her students to take part in competitions not only to compare their expertise with other dancers, but to see how a belly dancer should look. My other participants also confirmed that competitions provide a lot of stimuli to engage in the body care “to be liked by the public.” The belly dancing community holds an “ecological view” that manifests itself in application of organic and

handcrafted products the belly dancers use to make their hair shine and their skin look smooth. Long hair and smooth skin are considered as integral parts of the ideal image of the belly dancer. Through the body care those participants who have been dancing for a sufficient period of time, have developed a different relationship with their bodies and come to love them. As Lotos, who has a very womanly body, said:

I think I have almost a perfect body. I could show my body in underwear with any hesitation. I would look much better than any of these skinny models (Interview, March 9, 2014).

As Lotos's words show, together with the new relationship with the body there emerges a new, alternative, image of the ideal body that questions the beauty image currently circulating in the media that is artificially imposed as a representation of the ideal femininity.

The representation of the woman in belly dancing would be incomplete without costuming. In Russia the belly dance costume is hand-made and designed to interact with the concrete body. It serves to manifest the interplay between a dancer's expertise and her artistic representation—her identity and her body. The costume communicates a dancer's emotion and plays the role of an interlocutor in a dialogue between a dancer and her audience. In a certain sense, the costume is the extension of a dancer's body and her performative power.

All my participants mentioned the significance of costuming in shaping their emotional states before and during the competitions. Roxana explained:

I carefully select designers and fabric...I avoid what is vulgar. I know what I can display, my strengths...and I also think through my performance and how

comfortable I could be in this specific costume I am imagining (Interview, March 3, 2014).

Dana and Lana confirmed Roxana's view and explained that older dancers usually have full costumes or use special mesh for the costumes, which consist of two pieces (usually used for performing classical *raqs sharqi*). Most costumes designed to match the idea of a performance as a "gala day" or a special day: they all have bright colors, bear various prints, sequins, and are decorated with artificial precious stones, and the like. Ljudmila, who is usually wearing a suit during her work hours (common in the corporate discourse), said that she loves dearly these colors as she immediately feels like a holiday is approaching. Today, belly dancing competitions offer women of different generations a variety of ways to design the costume using colors the women have never dreamt of. In the meantime, my participants stressed that they are against "the vulgar" and "the risqué" in belly dancing costuming, because the woman "should respect herself," as Roxana noted. Dana said that some elderly women tend to show more of the body than is common on stage, but she added "maybe they need it at the moment."

In sum, doing the dance work and thinking through dance, belly dancers acquire various kinds of knowledge related to their bodies, including the functioning of the feminine body, women's health, the body's care, and costuming. Much of this knowledge is novel for Russian women as their previous knowledge was shaped in the Soviet period and soon after the collapse of the Soviets. Knowledge exchange occurs through the "dance talk" that is to a great extent about a dancer's body in motion. The talk involves all generations of women in a studio, thus, bringing together these different generations in one community of dancers.

Discussion: Empowerment

Overall, the findings reveal evidence of the empowering potential of belly dancing. It is not new, and the limited scholarly literature on the topic has identified the practice of belly dancing as empowering for women (Deagon, 2005; Moe, 2012; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). However, no research work has addressed the practice of belly dancing in Russia as my study did. The empowering effects of belly dancing on women in Russia are multifaceted and are directly linked to Russian cultural context.

My participants, several generations of Russian women, were brought up and educated in the culture where the Soviet legacy persisted even through transformations. Their corporeal styles and perceptions of their bodies have been strongly impacted by perceptions of gender roles referred to during the Soviet regime. As I discussed earlier in my introduction, for a long time gender roles in Russia were seen as relationships of men and women to the state (Ashwin, 2000), and men and women equally participated in the construction of communism. The role the Russian women have played as the major part of the country's workforce disavowed femininity and produced the norms for representation that can be called "unisex." The "double burden" many Russian women have been carrying as feminine breadwinners and household managers has had a specific impact on their corporeal styles, in Butler's words. Neck and shoulder pain due to monotonous work or a sedentary lifestyle, stiff body, mechanical movements are just a few features of this corporeal style my participants mentioned. In addition, the ongoing social transition accompanied by changes in social status, welfare, social relations, causes women to experience stress that affects their postures, facial expressions and the like.

Russian post-Soviet discourse, grounded on still powerful remnants of the Soviet ideology, embeds in a woman the idea that the real woman should be a good mother and a good worker. In addition, she has got to have perfect looks to succeed as a woman. The image of a skinny clothes model is now widely transmitted by the media. Yet, seeking to meet the expectations, a Russian woman often fails to set up a family and that can be problematic for several reasons, including Russia's demographic situation and the shortage of men. The failure is also a stressor, a woman perceives herself as "a wrong woman" and "a bad fit" in terms of her appearance. The situation is aggravated by the common perception that many life prospects close after the age of thirty-three five, especially for women. Such a situation poses discursive limits on women's autonomy to choose their paths for self-actualization. Regardless of the explanations for enrolling in belly dancing, by making their decisions my participants affirmed the agency of women and their desire to claim independence in the private sphere. Yet, none of my participants carrying "the double burden" questioned her full involvement in household affairs. On the contrary, explaining their motives for enrolling, women clearly stated that they would continue to bear work and domestic responsibilities, and the main question was to reconcile their conflicting schedules. The enrollment process reflects complexities of the ways Russian women negotiate their multiple roles while insisting on autonomy of certain actions. I see affirmation of women's agency as one of the major empowering effects of belly dancing, which is initially manifest at the stage of enrollment and is further validated by continuous attendance of the classes.

Upon enrollment, empowering effects of belly dancing are cumulative, and unfold at different stages of engagement. Pain relief and, eventually, liberation from pain

observed by my participants, is, probably, one of the most powerful immediate effects that have psychological and physiological impact on women as it clears the space for other sensations and emotions. Also, it gives a woman a possibility to use her body as a means for expressing emotion. As my study participants pointed out (e.g. Helga), Russian women have difficulty in expressing emotion, specifically via bodily means. Public exposure of emotion, especially positive emotion, has been very uncommon in Russia. Joy and smiles have been always addressed to the loved ones or used within “the circle of trust”. On the other hand, the contemporary Russian reality offers very few occasions for joy and laugh. Russians are very concerned with the country’s economic situation, the reforms of health care and education. The recent annexation of Crimea aggravated the political situation. Now the government is trying to tighten control over Russian citizens in many spheres (accounts in foreign banks, the use of media, etc.). Belly dancing teaches a woman to use her body as a medium of expression of various emotional states. Interestingly, when I asked my study participants what emotion each of them tried to translate into movements, all tagged emotions with positive modalities: joy, happiness, love, excitement, etc. They also mentioned that jokes at the training sessions and competitions are common, and belly dancing is very much fun. Thus, belly dancing works as an outlet, where a woman can openly express her emotions, and, through trying on different roles and preparing her individual performance, switches the modality of the emotions. The ability to switch between emotional states and control the emotions also has an empowering effect. Moreover, both a solo dance and a group dance help a woman explore various dimension of her identity via engaging the imaginary.

Besides emotions, belly dance work immerses a woman into the realm of sensations, which she experiences as reconnection to her body. The sense of embodiment is empowering per se as it affirms the dancers as a living subject. My participants framed it as the breach between the routine, where the body is shadowed, and the gala day, sensual celebration of femininity. Belly dancing that suggests the “flow of the body,” in Lotos’s words, alluding to the conceptualization of the feminine body as leaky that is opposite to the mechanical and automated body of the sexless Communist Constructor.

Gaining more control over her body that occurs against the background of positive emotions, women came to accept and love their own bodies and that has a profound effect on women, and affirms their self-confidence. The fact is that belly dance accommodates the bodies of different sizes and shapes as well as aging bodies, strengthens a woman’s self-esteem, and opens up prospects. Although belly dancing bodies do not meet social expectations, they also discover pleasures and kinesthetic empathy, which is often unavailable to the “ideal” bodies.

The knowledge women acquire acknowledging their bodies both as subjects and objects in the processes of dance work and body care is also empowering. For many generations of Russian women body care has been something beyond their regular lifestyles. The available means were limited, and the body was usually neglected. Today’s Russia offers a lot of possibilities for women to improve their body image through plastic surgery and other manipulations. However, Russian belly dancer prefer natural and organic products that I consider a sign of distrust of mainstream body care brands. It can be argued that body care has to do with consumerism and objectification of the belly dancer image. Although it’s true to some extent, as my participants have their

audience in mind, I claim that within the Russian cultural context the basics of body care reconnect women with their bodies and, consequently, with their femininity. The sensations associated with the body care and a woman's satisfaction with her looks re-attach a woman to her body and create bonds between a woman and her body, from which she was previously cut off.

Costuming plays a key role in supporting women's satisfaction with their appearance. Simultaneously, it disrupts the discursive representation of the Russian woman based on the Soviet legacy and neo-capitalist ideologies, and creates an alternative feminine image. Marjory said joking: "I will slip into my costume and will be gracing the world with my presence." However, I see in her words a powerful transformative potential. The costume spurs imagination and creativity that can drive a change. At least, its colors and design challenge the norms of the Soviet legacy. In my view, life under the Soviets was characterized by certain kinds of sensory deprivation. The cultural assumptions about what is "good taste" and what is "bad taste" were formed by revolutionary enthusiasm and Communist ideologies. Brightly colored clothes or bright women's manicure were perceived as absolutely out of place during "wartime" as the country was believed to be surrounded by enemies ready to unleash a war at any point. Joy and fun were also seen as unsuitable. People were primarily dressed in grey and brown. Public joy and smiling faces were rare. After the "iron curtain" fell the Russians, especially women, tried to satisfy their hunger for bright colors. However, the following economic crisis and financial constraints made it difficult for Russians in 1990s. Those girls who were born and raised during this period may also experience a kind of sensory deprivation that belly dancing compensates.

The “dance talk” ingrained in the communication processes of a dance studio also has a tremendous compensatory and empowering potential. In many ways it challenges silencing of sexual issues in Russian public discourse. In fact, not only sex-related issues, but also any body-related talk is somehow muted in Russia. Many Russians, especially those who grew up during the Soviet regime, experience difficulties in verbalizing their general health symptoms, let alone the articulation of experiences related to sexuality and desire. At this point, Russian public discourse seems to be still lacking the language able to render an individual’s bodily experiences linked to femininity, masculinity and sexuality as well as women’s and men’s health. The conversation around such issues in belly dance studios has a tremendous effect on developing women’s knowledge about their bodies and their processes. The studios turn into places where the younger women get hands-on experience on how the feminine body functions, what should be regarded a concern that requires special treatment or a visit to the doctor; they come to understand why and how it’s necessary to maintain the aging body in good shape by observing different generations of women practicing together. My participants don’t take this information as discouraging, on the contrary. Looking at the older generation of women who now count as the category of Grand Seniors in the belly dancing community, they feel more optimistic about their future perspectives. Jade recognized that her level of dancing proficiency is lower than that of “mature” women who have been dancing longer. As she remarked, she is going to continue dancing for many years to reach their level. Helga adores the way the older dancers are performing. She said that they are “real women and can communicate much more through their dance.” These perceptions challenge common Russian obsessions with young bodies that discursively disregard

women reaching the age of forty, who are often considered, and consider themselves (!) “old” and run-down.

The “dance talk” in the belly dancing studios is critical for women’s empowerment as it creates alternative discourses of the female body, age, sexuality and the body care, and costuming. It also creates a new discourse of communication between generations of women disrupting the stereotypes about the generation gap, “the Soviets” and “post-Soviets”. These are the empowering effects of belly dancing for Russian women that emerged from the interviews with my participants. To this I would also add the powerful sense of community, and even of “family ties” emerging between belly dancers that my participants mentioned. The belly dancing community can also be regarded as a support network that serves for empowerment of its members.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Chapter V provides a brief account of the research findings presented in the previous chapter. It also addresses theoretical implications that arise from the study’s findings. Finally, this chapter presents limitations of the study and outlines directions for further research.

The thesis attempted to address a general gap in the body scholarship and “to do justice to individuals’ embodied experiences” (Davis, 1997, p.15) by drawing on the accounts of Russian women about their participation in belly dancing. Simultaneously, the thesis contributes to the still limited research on belly dancing, and analyzes the practice within the Russian context that, to the best of my knowledge, no research has done so far. In the meantime, as I stated in the introduction, belly dancing has a

tremendous capacity to attract women worldwide, the evidence of which is proliferation of belly dancing communities in many Western countries, including the USA and Russia.

Conceptualizing dance as a corporeal experience, I argue that belly dancing has a multifaceted nature grounded on physical, cognitive and sensual qualities of the body, as Chapter II shows in the review of literature on the topic of corporeality. Throughout history, the practice of belly dancing has been modified through incorporation of different cultural patterns of embodiment. As a result, its contemporary form fuses the original patterns that emerged in the Middle East with transnational and local. Besides, being originally performed by the both sexes, the dance has become distinctly gendered and turned to a feminist practice, as the previous research shows (Deagon, 2005; Kraus, 2010; Maira, 2008; Moe, 2012; Keft-Kennedy, 2005a, 2005b). Hence, belly dancing has become the site of multiple intermixed discourses that unfold in performance and representation of primarily the female body.

For this study I interviewed Russian women to explore how their social identities shaped within the Russian context are experienced and communicated through bodily movements. Specifically, I sought to identify cultural tensions caused by enactment of transnational dance, while exploring the functions of belly dancing for Russian women. Chapter IV provides discussion of four broad themes that emerged from the analysis of my participants' interviews: (1) explanations of the motives for enrollment in belly dancing; (2) belly dancing as a remedy; (3) bodily knowledge; (4) the empowering effect of the dance. The discussion of these themes in Chapter IV and their relevance to Russian contexts are based primarily on my experiences of Russian reality as I was born and raised in Russia, and lived through various periods of Russian history that embraced

radical political and economic transformations. Overall, the study findings confirm the results of other scholarly works that explored belly dancing in Western context by stating that belly dancing has a universal empowering effect on women (Deagon, 2005; Moe, 2012). I concede that based on specifics of local contexts the valences of women's empowerment in different countries vary. Approaching belly dancing as a combination of physiological and psychological processes shaped by Russian contexts and characterized by ongoing social transition accompanied by the changes in Russian culture, I point to remedial effects of belly dancing for Russian women. Following Turner (1984), I assume that somatic symptoms my participants mentioned can result from social stressors. Dance movements control muscular actions, so that a dancer can abate the effects caused by social and personal stressors (whether at work, in the family, or in politics). Mastering movements and performing, a dancer gets the sense of control over her body and emotional states, and learns how to deal with stressors by moderating their effects through the body, mind, and emotions. The amalgamation of bodily, cognitive, and affective processes turns belly dancing into a remedy. The dance work engages the creation of a new "affective order" (Lyon, 1997) within a dance studio that forms new relational networks. Simultaneously, belly dance studios turn into places where various kinds of bodily knowledge are accumulated and exchanged between the dancers. Knowledge and shared emotion set up conditions for turning separate dancers into a collectivity that compensates the issues arising from dislocation and atomization of contemporary Russian society.

In this conclusion I would also caution against extrapolating some paradigms existing in Western scholarship on Russian cultural contexts by drawing on some conceptualization of belly dance discourse in the literature discussed in Chapter II.

As Jarmakani (2005), Maira (2008), and Shay and Sellers-Young (2005) note, the embodiment of the exotic other in the West has always represented complex relations between colonized bodies and the civilized metropolis. Exoticism, and oriental dance as well, sought to domesticate the other and make it less threatening. Viewed through this lens, the case of cultural appropriation of belly dance has an overtly negative connotation. Although Russian cultural imperialism towards other peoples in the Caucasus and Asia cannot be discarded, in Russia belly dancing was adopted as a practice in the 1990s, the times of historic turbulence and turmoil. The imaginary it engages is more than an escape from the Russian reality that offers women little in terms of delight. In addition, the “oriental dream” reflects disillusionment in Western liberal values strongly supported by propagandist efforts of the government. Yet the official discourse suggests no alternative. Moreover, I argue that in Russia where a woman’s sacrifice and duty to the family and nation have always taken precedence over her rights as an individual, belly dancing affirms feminine agency, disrupting her discursive dependency.

Most Western scholarly writings (Deagon, 2005; Jorgensen, 2012; Jarmakani, 2005; etc.) point out the inevitable objectification of the feminine body on stage, and even indicate that belly dancers are often described as exhibitionistic (Deagon, 2005). Whereas I agree that objectification of the feminine image and consumerism are part of belly dance transnational discourse that makes the dance part of global pop-culture, I believe, that for Russian women, and especially those of the older generation, a chance to

appear on stage is more about self-affirmation. Coupled with the discovery of inherent femininity it has a powerful liberating effect. As for the desire to highlight natural beauty with make-up or the use of the body care products that introduce a woman to the world of consumers, well, so many generations had very limited access to these means, and I understand why Russian women feel hunger for this kind of things.

While the belly dancer image and costuming allude to the issues of sexuality discussed in Western scholarship, my Russian participants barely touched or developed this topic. I attribute it to the fact that Russian culture is more “relational.” For Russian women sexuality is intertwined with Love (capital letter intended). So, my participants talked more about what it means to be loved and cherished and how to express it through dance than about sexuality and desire. With this the belly dancing body becomes a means through which a new vocabulary of emotions is developed. This vocabulary facilitating feminine self-expression is based on corporeality and presumes the knowledge of the feminine body and its capacities. The development of the new vocabulary and accumulation of knowledge related to movement and the bodily issues occur via intensive communication processes, which, in turn, create and cement the belly dancing community. The community plays the role of support network, as well as socializing new generations of belly dancers into womanhood, while also bridging these different generations. Overall, it has a tremendously empowering effect.

Yet, in most cases the communication and knowledge are confined to belly dance studios. While most works on belly dancing value the practice for its distinct gendered nature, I am keen on expressing a concern about visible segregation of leisure activities. The segregation affirms traditional division of masculine and feminine domains, and,

therefore, plays into the hands of those who argue for patriarchy as foundational for Russian society. As some scholars note (Ashwin, 2002; Kukhterin, 2000; Meshcherkina, 2000), with the resurgence of masculinity accompanied by reaffirmation of a heterosexual family, Russian men tend to spend less time participating in household affairs. They find leisure activities that are considered male (for example playing dominos in the yard while drinking beer). Dancing is an inappropriate leisure activity for “real men.” Given that even the audience at belly dance competitions is predominantly female, I wonder whether the new feminine vocabulary emerging within the belly dancing community conveys the same meanings of Love and relationships to occasional male viewers. While engagement in belly dancing creates a new discourse of the feminine body and the knowledge that challenges both Soviet and post-Soviet public discourses, it rather emerges as marginal. Nevertheless, I argue that belly dancing can be regarded as a form of feminine resistance, yet rather passive in Russian conditions.

#### Limitations and Further Directions

Although this study addresses essential gaps in existing scholarship on corporeality, dance, and belly dancing specifically, it has several significant limitations. First, due to time constraints and communication across different time zones, the study is based on a limited number of participants. Future studies on the practice of belly dancing in Russian should include participants from more diverse Russian cities. Second, the study used the interview technique, so the results of the study are specific for my participants’ mindsets and perceptions. Furthermore, the study relies on my participants’ narrative accounts, which are difficult to verify. In addition, the experience of dance is

ephemeral and hard to recall. Each time dance produces different sensations. It is likely that my participants recalled the most memorable experiences, while other experiences, which might also be relevant for the study, were left out. Most of my participants share the sedentary lifestyle associated with their occupations that can potentially have impact on their subjective perceptions of movement. For further research it would be valuable to interview women of different lifestyles, and possibly compare the bodily experiences of Russian women engaged in different types of bodywork.

Also, the research was designed to answer general questions related to Russian women's experiences in belly dance classes and the transformation of meanings attached to the body via long-term participation. During my interviews some other themes emerged that deserve special research attention. One of the major themes deals with the specifics of communication processes in a dance studio. Enactment of transnational dance requires a special vocabulary, because Russian as a language does not have enough words to describe all movements. As a result, new words are invented. Power relations and the power of instructor in a studio is another topic that should be incorporated in future research agendas. It would be also important to conduct a content analysis of the "dance talk" to see how it relates to sensemaking and socialization processes. Specific attention should be paid to the male audience of belly dancing. Another gendered perspective on belly dancing would help to better comprehend the phenomenon itself and the features of its emerging discourse. These are only a few avenues future research on belly dancing in Russia can take, while the possibilities of exploring this practice across cultural contexts are limitless.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Protocol

Project: Russian Women and Belly Dancing: Body Work, Fun or Transformation>

Location \_\_\_\_\_ Skype, cyberspace \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Galina Khartulari \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee \_\_\_\_\_ A Russian woman engaged in belly dancing

### *Script*

Welcome and thank you for your agreement to participate in a Skype interview today. My name is Galina Khartulari and I am a Communication graduate student at DePaul University conducting my study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my master's degree in Organizational and Multicultural Communication.

I am conducting the research study because I am trying to learn more about what belly dancing means to Russian women, how it influences their lives, and how it helps them to cope with various pressures. The interview will take about 40-60 minutes and will include questions about how long you have been engaged in belly dancing, why you decided to enroll in belly dance classes, what belly dancing has given you, and how it has changed your life. I would like your permission to record this Skype interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know. All of your responses are confidential. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used to develop a better understanding of your experience associated with the practice of belly dancing.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, take a break, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

### *Interview Questions*

1. Tell me about your typical week and how belly dancing fits it.
2. Take me back through your history and tell me how it happened that you enrolled in a belly dance class. When and why?
3. Can you walk me through your personal process of learning how to dance?  
What was difficult and hindered your learning? What helped?

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4. Thinking about your previous answers can you describe some details of what you have gained from belly dancing? Is it what you expected from the start or how it differs from your expectations?

What about your gains in terms of your:

- body image?
- social environment?
- work environment?
- feelings about yourself?

5. Tell me what is it like to be engaged in belly dancing.

What it means for you to be part of the belly dancing community?

6. Demographic information:

A. How old are you?

(a) twenties; (b) thirties; (c) forties; (d) fifties;

B. What is your occupation?

C. What's your marital status?

(a) single; (b) married; (c) in partnership; (d) other;

D. How does dancing practice affect your budget?

(a) a great deal; (b) moderately; (c) not at all;

### *Closure*

Before we conclude the interview would you like to share anything else?

As I said at the beginning, the information you gave will be kept confidential. Thank you for your participation.